4th Sunday of Lent
Sermon 3.10.24

Numbers 21:4-9
From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke 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." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3:14-21
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. "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. "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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." (365)

The Gospel of John has an explicit purpose. The writer of this book has a clear purpose in writing it and he says as much just before the book is finished. "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

It's a mission statement that comes toward the end, which any good executive director will tell you is all wrong. Your mission statement must be short and must be up front. This one, not quite short enough, comes almost at the very end, at what was almost certainly intended to be the end, the last verses of the 20th chapter, just before the 21st chapter, a *last* last chapter that reads like a "oh, and one more thing" moment, one more story of Jesus showing up, resurrected and encountering his friends that the writer almost left out or was told after he'd finished his manuscript or was added on later on by someone else. ("Oh, and one more thing…")

So, this second to last chapter, this almost last few verses, it's a mission statement that, once you arrive at it, though too late to really serve its clarifying purpose, probably wouldn't

surprise you much. It's been all over this book, that you believe in Jesus. Ninety-eight times, in 85 verses, our writer urges belief in Jesus. Whether it happens in a conversation among characters or in the narrative voice to the reader, there is an urgency in believing in Jesus. Not least in the verses we just heard read, that "…everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life," that by this right belief "the world might be saved through him," belief in Jesus is urgently needed. "Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

A lot that's wrong with contemporary Christianity, if you ask me, stems from a corruption of this urgent call, that we believe in Jesus. Belief has become a thing both hardened, inflexible, while also brittle, easily broken. It appears in our public life more as ideology than faith, more as an ideology you must swear by and then spout forth wherever you go than as a faith you may live into as trust and gentle surrender—and then courageous surrender.

Courageous because the belief in Jesus that John urges is a shocking one, an unsettling one. Everything amazing Jesus is remembered in this gospel narrative to have done (and there have been quite a few things—turning water into wine, healing a dying daughter, making a man born blind to see, raising Lazarus from the dead): everything amazing Jesus is remembered to have done is a prelude to the ultimate sign, which comes at the moment when Jesus is lifted up on the cross, when Jesus at last is crucified. Up to that moment, Jesus' life has been one amazing sign after another, and then long bouts of teaching in between. Jesus performs amazing signs in the gospel, and more than that he talks, he interprets, which is all (let's be honest) more puzzling than it is clarifying. John's Jesus speaks forth fog as much as light. But you sort of get it in retrospect, once the ultimate sign has been set forth. You sort of get it if you read back after the ultimate sign, though this one not unquestionably amazing but shocking, unsettling: the crucifixion, the lifting up of Jesus on the cross.

It's a shocking moment because it means that the Son of God is the crucified one, it means that the one worthy of our worship is the one whom the world will appear to defeat, not the one who will clearly defeat the world.

Shocking. Utterly unexpected.

We were watching a movie, Jack and I were. He was young, maybe ten years old, and it was a comedy, a very silly one, "The Anchorman." Will Farrell plays an anchorman for a local news affiliate and his macho world is being invaded by women and their new ideas, or at least by one woman and her new ideas. (This is Hollywood, after all, where there's always but one woman for

every five or more men.) There's nothing subtle here. The comedy is broad, and I don't mean that to indicate women because, as I said, there's only one here.

And then there's this moment, when the anchorman is driving his car over a bridge and his beloved dog, a small terrier, is in the passenger seat beside him. The terrier has been enjoying an open window, leaning out into all that wind. But they're stopped in traffic now, and an enemy of the anchorman approaches the car. Jack Black plays the character, he who is as understated as a sharknado. He grabs the dog and yanks him out the window and throws him off the bridge, now sailing through the air (a puppet, turns out, and quite obviously so on second viewing), sailing through the air in a lonely, floppy arc, a quiet splash.

There is nothing realistic about what we've just been made to see. But it so utterly broke the rules the movie had established that Jack (Goodman) burst into tears, raged toward the television, and switched it off. "We're not watching any more of that!"

(We eventually did, later that day or later that week—or month. And the dog survives the assault, crawls out of the river beneath the bridge off which he'd been hurled, all to exact terrier revenge on the most deserving Jack Black.)

The crucifixion is like that, changing the rules, breaking trust with the audience, the followers. It's like that—but not funny, just in its breaking the rules, utterly, utterly breaking trust.

And, on second thought, maybe also a little bit funny. A divine comedy, if you will. The defeat of death. The undoing of dread. Stirring of deep, if also unsettling, joy: this is God, this is your God.

If you can get with it. A crucified God. A crucified and resurrected God?

Turns out, quite often we can't "get with it." Turns out, quite often, we humans rather tilt in the direction of obvious, glorious, glittering power. We humans do tend to hate frailty, to prefer toughness. That's what the latest polling indicates: we Americans don't want a "frail old man" to be our president, we want someone who's going to be tough, to project strength.

It was true in the ancient world, too, among the Greeks with their heroes, among the Romans with their gladiators and the politicians who owned them and had them fight as proxies of their projected power. It was true among the ancient Hebrews as well, with their messianic hope pinned on the one who would come as a great warrior on behalf Israel and Judea, a great warrior-king who would defeat the latest imperial overlord (Babylon, Assyria, Rome) and would restore this ancient United Kingdom, Israel and Judah, to its former glory and proper place.

And it was thought for a while that this would be Jesus. He bore many of the signs of the messiah long promised.

But he also lacked more than a few.

Judas would eventually betray him, so goes one theory, because Jesus was more and more failing to live up to this promise, to live into this avenging notion of what the messiah would do. To create victors of those who'd for too long been victims! Payback!

No, Jesus would rather go ahead and save this whole sorry, undeserving world.

We continue our tour of the covenants of old. Lent, this six-week season, has us revisiting the covenants of the Old Testament. Beginning four weeks ago with the covenant the Lord established with Noah, then continuing with the one promising Abraham and Sarah a wealth of descendants, and then last week the one to gather the whole people Israel in the uttering of the Ten Commandments, we've been revisiting the greats.

This week we continue, but with a covenant a bit less great, or at least quite a bit more bizarre. This story that comes to us from the wilderness is a weird one. It has all sorts of theological problems, and they stem from this new monotheism that the people were getting used to.

There is one God, the Lord, it had been established. And this one God created the whole world, it had been proposed and confessed. But the world is filled with things that are scary or dangerous or deadly. So, what of that?

The question was still a fresh one, so new was this revelation of One True God, the creator of all that is. So, the answers were blunt and not all that satisfying. See, there were serpents in the wilderness, and some of them bit some of the people, and some of the people were poisoned and even died—which all must somehow be an expression of God's will and intent. If this created order is come from God's good and faithful word, then God must have sent serpents, for which there must have been some reason:

The people had complained. They'd despaired about their time in the wilderness, and they had blamed God and Moses. They were hungry and thirsty and tired and beset with the terrors of uncivilization, just as they would soon suffer the terrors of civilization, having to make war with other peoples in order to make a place for themselves.

Some would even prefer life back in Egypt, enslaved and exploited, to this bare existence in the desert—which they then assumed would make God angry to hear, whereupon he would send serpents, to bite, to torment and punish and give the complaining people their due.

You know, like you do with your child: when he complains that he's hungry and asks for some fish, you give him a snake instead because he'd been complaining? Or if the child, whining and crying, asks for an egg, you give her a scorpion just to show her who's boss. Right?

(That's Jesus, by the way, calling into question this whole line of thinking.)

For what it's worth, the world-view of the Gospel of John is quite different from this monotheism that gets in its own way. In the Gospel of John, we revisit the creation of the world. This gospel begins in the beginning, with the Word, the Word that was with God and the Word that was God. None of the other four gospel narratives begin quite so far distant at the beginning. But John even echoes the beginning as imagined in the first verses of the first chapter of the first book of the Bible, Genesis 1:1 "In the beginning…"

Where John departs from the Genesis world-view is in imaging whether the creation is complete. In Genesis, God the Creator is imagined as having finished his work of creating and therefore resting because of his completed work. In the Gospel of John, God is not imagined as having completed the work of creation. It is work on-going. What's more, Jesus is imagined as having come to complete it, come to continue in the work of the Father, doing the works that the Father does, work that at last comes complete in his pouring himself out on the cross, his last word uttered here, "It is finished." The world is made perfect and complete in God's self-giving action whose apotheosis is the sacrificial love of Christ on the cross.

It's an apocalyptic event, a revelation of the last event, that occurs in time as a promise of what shall surely be: God will pour God-self out that the creation might be perfect, awash in the love that creates, sustains, and redeems.

Meanwhile, the creation is not complete—which means the clash of creatures seeking full being as themselves aren't an expression of God's good and complete will but are an indication that the creation is not complete. Serpents who bite in self-defense and people who need not to be bitten aren't an expression of God's perfect intention but are a sign that amidst the creation much is still being worked out.

The emblem the Lord told Moses to make, a serpent on a pole that could be raised for people to see and by which seeing they would be healed: it was as a witness. By some miracle, the people could look at what was killing them and, in recognition of it, be saved from it—an inoculation, if you will. So too the cross: our gospel writer has Jesus urging in this conversation, whose second half we hear in our reading today, that the raising up of the Son of Man on the cross

can have a similarly saving power. We are to look at it and to see what's killing us and, by this recognition, be saved from it.

It is our violence that's killing us. It is our trust in our violence, our trust that we know how to wield violence and against whom to wield it so to safeguard our lives: it is our trust in this that's killing us. It's our belief that we know who's rightly to be killed off or, at the very least, who's rightly to be excluded so we can establish our safety and longevity; it's our belief that we can take a true measure of things and know that it's better for this one person to die than for a whole bunch of people to suffer, because it's likely that one person deserves it; it's our moment-to-moment calculation, and the quick-to-follow justification, that some are in and some are out and the ones who are out are rightly so: it's this that's killing us. We believe in glittering power. We believe in might making right. We believe that weak are rightly to die off, or at least that there's nothing we can do about so let's lean into it, lest we be one of the weak rightly to die off. We trust this all with our lives. And it will kill us.

Not literally, not everyone. Most of us will participate in this and will not suffer its terrible playing out. Our society is big, civilization is enormous, and most of us will never suffer it's vicious, whipping tail, its grinding gears that some unfortunate few will slip into, of whom we might even convince ourselves they had it coming or at least that's just the cost of doing business. Omelets, broken eggs: you know how it goes.

God's response to all this is, all those cracked eggs, all those ground in history's gears, all those who pay the cost of society's doing business? God's response is, "That's me."

Look and see. Look up and see. The crucified one is God. God is not the victor, the one in an impressive suit or a general's metal-laden uniform or the woman who embodies perfectly the latest fashion trends or the leader whose face is printed on the money, but is the crucified one, raised up so we might see and know, see and recognize, see and believe.

Believe in Jesus.

Believe in Jesus, in solidarity with whom will be the salvation of the world. But not as religious orthodoxy or as ideological purity, but as practice, lived practice. This isn't about religion. It's certainly not about anything as divorced from the world as ideology. This is about what we believe, what we trust with our very lives, and how that then would have us live: amidst the inevitable of gears, the impossible of grace. Believe.

By which belief it might not be impossible.

We gather here for this “maybe.” We gather here to make occasion for this “maybe,” that what might be is given way that it shall be. It’s just not finished yet. So, let’s see.

Thanks be to God.