

September 14, 2008
Holy Cross Day

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Numbers 21:4-9

God becomes enemy in order to become friend

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; **5** they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" **6** Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. **7** The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people. **8** The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." **9** So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

"How would you like to take a bite out of the cross? I bet most of you would not. However, today is Holy Cross day – a day that originated in the alleged rediscovery of the Cross in the rubble of Jerusalem during the time of Constantine. The most intriguing bit of legend about that is the report by a Spanish Pilgrim, Egeria (ca. 385-388), that the deacons had to post guards so the pilgrims who came to kiss the cross would not bite out splinters of it to take home with them! Imagine such a scene. I do not know what's worse, the pilgrim who wanted a bite of the cross, or a church that stood guard to make sure they did not get it!

Times have not changed. It seems all throughout history both the church and its members often confuse things.

In our reading from the book of Numbers, we find the people of Israel utterly confused. Even worse, they are murmuring. If you have ever read the Old Testament, you surely know that the Israelites constantly murmured (Numbers 14:2; 16:13; 20:3; 21:5).

What you might not know is that their murmuring was not simple complaining. They were not acting like babies. There is real urgency in their cry. The people were literally hyperventilating from panic. They thought they were going to die. That is why verse 5 says, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert?"

This is important because many of us think that today's passage is a lesson on complaining. That is not true. If this passage were about complaining, God would have made the people mute. God would have placed a sign on the pole that read: "Thou shall not complain." The truth of the matter is that there is nothing wrong with complaining to God. Moses complained. David complained. It is okay to complain to God.

The real issue is faith. The people in the wilderness do not believe that God, in his goodness, will deliver them. Even though God delivered them from Egypt, from the pursuing army, from hunger, and from thirst, they still do not trust God's goodness.

Isn't faith always the issue? Back in the garden the serpent told Eve, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:4-5). In other words, the reason God does not want you to eat the fruit is because he is holding back from you. God does not want to give you everything. You cannot trust this God.

We fall into this trap as well. We too question God's goodness. We live in a time when God has given us the greatest abundance in human history but when the economy stumbles we are afraid he will not provide. God has given us a chance to live during a time of great medical advancements but when an illness hits we feel forsaken by God. It seems that we are always looking for the black lining in the silver cloud. We are waiting for the other shoe to drop.

What is worse is the fact that because we do not trust God, we often do things to protect ourselves from God. Adam and Eve hid from God. The Pharisees tried to be perfect by following the law. Early Christians bit pieces of the cross with their teeth for luck. We try to be good people so that we remain on God's good side. Why? Because we are afraid of God. We do not trust his goodness.

Did you hear about the children that lined up in the cafeteria for lunch? At the head of the table was a large pile of apples. Next to the pile was a note that read, "Take only one, God is watching." At the end of the table was a large pile of chocolate chip cookies. As one little boy saw the cookies he wrote a note and placed it next to the cookies. It read, "Take all you want, God is watching the apples."

If we could only be as bold as that little boy. Instead, we are afraid of God.

What must God do to correct our vision of him? What must God do in order to put to death this kind of thinking? God could spoil us and give us everything. That did not work for Adam and Eve in paradise. It has not worked for us in America.

In the passage, God takes a different tack. God actually becomes what the people think he is. They think God is the enemy. God actually becomes their enemy. God sends fiery serpents filled with venom. Talk about a terrifying prospect. It is bad enough when we think God is our enemy. What about when it actually occurs. I cringe at such a thought.

Realizing that God had become their enemy, the people plead for mercy. Thankfully, God answers their plea but in an unexpected way. God commands Moses to put a snake on a pole. Why in the world does God do this? God is forcing his people to face what it is that is killing them, namely their unbelief. They have to look into the serpent and there they see the real problem, it is not the physical serpents biting them, rather, it is the sin of Adam and Eve. It is the sin that we do not trust God. It is the sin of thinking that God is the enemy. It is the sin of waiting for the other shoe to drop. This must die.

By giving the sign of the serpent, God is having mercy on his people. God is being gracious. God is telling them that he is not their enemy. An enemy does not relent. An enemy does not stop. God is not the enemy. God is demonstrating his love! God is capturing their hearts. God is being their good and gracious Lord!

There was a young man who came into my office to confess his sin. After the absolution, he told me that his sin had plagued him for some time. I said sin often causes guilt. He said the guilt was not the problem. Rather, it is getting away with the sin. This scared him because he kept waiting for God to punish him. I told him, if God actually punishes us for every sin we commit, we would never reach adulthood. Instead, all we can do is thank God for his unexpected mercy.

God's mercy is always unexpected. On the cross, God had every right to wipe out humanity. On the cross, God had every right to call down legions of angels. That is what we would expect. God did the unexpected. Jesus stayed on the cross. Jesus said to his Father, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do!"

Conclusion

Reformation, on this Holy Cross Day, look to the cross and live! See the death that had to occur. Not a death to appease some cosmic bank account. Not a death in order to teach us a lesson. Instead, it is the death of thinking that God is the enemy. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

God loves you. He created this world for you. God made a covenant with Abraham for you. God led Israel out of Egypt for you. God put a snake on a pole for you. God died on the cross for you. God enters the water of holy baptism for you. God enters bread and wine for you. God is not your enemy. God is your friend.

Isn't this better than a bite out of wood?

**In Jesus' Name,
Amen**