

Lent 4B Sermon 032209
Numbers 21:4-9; ;Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22
Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

In the name of the God who cares for us even when we are parched. Amen.

Happy Mother's Day. What? You didn't know that it was Mother's Day? Well, the fourth Sunday of Lent, in Brittan, is known as "Mothering Sunday". This was a holiday that was put in place centuries before there was an American Mother's Day – or even an America for that matter. The fourth Sunday in Lent is a little more than halfway through our 40 day Lenten observances. The medieval Roman Church called this *Laetere* Sunday, "*Laetere*" being the Latin word for rejoice. So during this Sunday when the Church would rejoice a little, and take a break to be refreshed during the austere Lenten rituals, English servants were given this Sunday off, so that they could go and visit both their own mothers and their "mother churches," or home parishes, before they had to get ready for the big Easter celebrations in their masters' homes. This Sunday is known by a variety of names – Mothering Sunday; *Laetere* Sunday and Refreshment Sunday. But any way you put it, the message is the same: we've been involved in our Lenten discipline for three weeks and it is time to be refreshed for a week, healed of our self-inflicted wounds (if you will), comforted and grateful for what God has given us, before we jump back in and prepare in earnest for Holy Week.

In recognition of the halfway point in our Lenten journey, we get an Old Testament reading from a book we seldom see in the lectionary cycle – Numbers. In the reading we

just heard, the Israelites were a little over halfway into their wilderness journey. Moses had led them out of Egypt; God had parted the Red Sea to allow them to escape Pharaoh's army; they had been out in the wilderness for over twenty years and God had continuously provided both food and water for them. And here they were again, complaining to Moses because God had "only" given them manna to eat. One day, after their incessant complaining about being taken into the desert to die – never mind that God had made food appear and water flow from a rock – they learned what misery really was. Their encampment was overrun by poisonous snakes, which proceeded to bite and kill "many" of the Israelites.

As was the way with this group whom God referred to as, "stiff-necked people," once they suffered snakebites, they repented yet again from their rebellion and with Moses' prayers on their behalf God forgave them. God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. The people who were bitten by the snakes could look at the bronze snake and be healed. And the message to the people was clear – the snake, which could bring sickness and death to the people while they were separated from God, could bring healing to them when blessed by God.

Understanding this story as He did, Jesus made reference to it in His conversation with Nicodemus, the Pharisee. Although he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling counsel of Israel, and was a very devout teacher of Jewish law, Nicodemus recognized something in Jesus that he had never seen in another Rabbi, and he was trying to

understand who Jesus was and why He had come to the Jewish people. In the course of their conversation, Jesus told 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 in an ironic way, Jesus showed Nicodemus what Moses showed the Israelites; what was dangerous or deadly when separated from God, would provide healing and wholeness when blessed by God.

The leaders of the Temple in Jesus’ day had taken the religion that began with Abraham and had turned it into a legalistic, judgmental, exclusionary activity – one that sought not to bring people into closer relationship with God, but rather to sit in judgment of each other and to set apart certain classes of people and to recognize them as being better, more holy than other people. This form of Judaism was poisoning the people – it was killing their spirits as surely as the snakes killed their ancestors. And Jesus, interceding on behalf of the people – just as Moses had before Him – received the means of cure that would heal the people and make them whole. The problem, as Nicodemus struggled to understand, was that the cure would not come from lifting up a statue on a stick. This time, the cure would come from lifting this Rabbi, Jesus up on a cross.

God the Father, the creator of the universe, brought about healing in the children of Israel, simply by having them look at a statue of a snake on top of a pole. But by the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry, things had gotten much worse. The people were no longer just stiff-necked, they were openly separating God’s children, one from another and were

actually presuming to know so much about God's mind that they would kill each other in the name of God. The poison among these people needed a much different cure.

“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.” God allowed His only son to be taken by cruel, uncaring and ungodly people. God allowed His only son to be beaten, made fun of, spit upon and ultimately hung on a cross – mounted on a pole – so that everyone could look at Him and be healed.

And the story continues even today.

There is power in the cross of Christ. When used correctly it is the power of healing and wholeness; the power of the Kingdom of God, of new and eternal life. Unfortunately, the current generation of stiff-necked people have found a way to separate even this grace filled gift of God, from the God who gave it. In the world today, especially in this nation, there are people who, in the name of Jesus Christ would separate God's children one from another; would demonize some of God's children while holding others up as “the holy ones.”

The current stiff-necked people use Jesus' words against those with whom they disagree. Jesus' words, “Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already,” are read as a manifesto for excluding certain groups of people from a place at the Holy Table, while His other words, “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.” are, if not ignored, at least discounted.

God gave up His only Son to the powers of evil and death so that the whole world might come under the power of His healing and saving grace. As the author of the Letter to the Ephesians says, “we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” This is the mark of a creator God who desperately loves His creation and wants that creation to love Him in return. Ephesians goes on to say, “by grace (we) have been saved through faith, and this is not (our) own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” In other words, the healing power of the cross of Christ is given to everyone, even though no one has ever deserved it. We – all of us; the WHOLE WORLD – have been saved by the grace of God, through the healing power of the Cross.

On this Refreshment Sunday, take comfort – Laetere (rejoice) – feel the healing, motherly care of the God who loves YOU so much that God gave His only Son so that YOU may not perish, but may have eternal life. Amen.