

The Fourth Sunday in Lent
John 3:14-21

Turning a Corner^{*}

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It's been quite the flu season. A good number of my friends from across the country, including several priests, have come down with the flu over the last few months. I'm told that this year's flu season has been the worst one since the swine flu pandemic from nine years ago. I've certainly been grateful for both flu shots and hand sanitizer!

The good news is that we've turned a corner on the flu season. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the number of new flu cases has finally peaked, and we are now on a downward trend. It appears that the worst is over. We're not quite out of the woods, but the end is in sight.

Today is the Fourth Sunday in Lent, and we've also turned a corner, liturgically speaking. This Sunday marks the midpoint of Lent, which occurred on this past Thursday. We're still in the Lenten season, but we can see the sun peeking through the storm clouds. We're not quite out of the Lenten wilderness yet, but Holy Week and the resurrection is in sight.

The Fourth Sunday in Lent is traditionally called Laetare Sunday. "Laetare" is the Latin word for "rejoice," which was the first word of today's introit, or entrance chant, in the ancient Roman rite. On Laetare Sunday, some of the stricter Lenten disciplines were relaxed by the church. For example, flowers were allowed on this day, as were weddings, instrumental music, and rose vestments.

We do some relaxing ourselves on this day at the Little Church. We began our mass with the Ten Commandments instead of the Great Litany. The celebrant wears a rose chasuble today instead of a violet one. And we use the second Lenten preface to the Eucharistic Prayer, which describes our "prepar[ation] with joy" for the Paschal feast. We're not quite out of Lent, but the end is in sight.

Today's lectionary readings are also about turning a corner, although it might be a bit hard to see this at first. You may have noticed that both the Hebrew Bible reading and the Gospel reading refer to a rather strange image of a bronze serpent on a pole. You can also see this image on the cover of your bulletin. What is this image about, and how are we to understand it today?

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In our reading from the Book of Numbers, we hear about the Israelites who just can't stop complaining about the miserable food and lack of water as they wander around for forty years in the wilderness. God gets fed up with all this complaining, and so God sends a bunch of poisonous serpents that bite the Israelites and kill many of them. (This is not exactly what I would call a pastoral response, but who am I to judge?)

As a result of this punishment, the Israelites repent of their complaining. They beg Moses to intercede on their behalf. God hears Moses' prayers and instructs him to make a bronze serpent and to put it on a pole. Anyone who was bitten by a serpent could look at the bronze serpent, and that person would live. As the psalmist writes, God "sent forth his word and healed them / and saved them from the grave."

This mysterious bronze serpent also makes an appearance in today's gospel reading from the third chapter of John. Jesus compares himself to the serpent on the pole. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness," he says, "so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

So how do we make sense of this odd image of a serpent on a pole? Why does Jesus compare himself to the bronze serpent – something that might seem like magic or idolatry to us? (Think, for example, of the golden calf.) And isn't the serpent associated with evil and deceit, particularly given the Book of Genesis and the fall of Adam and Eve?

Well, in the ancient world, there was actually a surprising connection between serpents and healing. In our reading from Numbers, the bronze serpent basically acted as an antidote to poison. Think of it as Tamiflu in a world that didn't have flu shots or hand sanitizer.

It is said that, at one point, the bronze serpent had a name – *Nehushtan* – and it was venerated in temple worship during the monarchic period of Ancient Israel. Interestingly, the bronze serpent is described in today's reading from Numbers as a *saraph* in the Hebrew, and not *nahash*, the usual word for serpent. *Saraph* is the same word used for the seraphim, the fiery serpent-like angels that fly around God's throne in heaven. And so there is actually something quite holy about the image of the bronze serpent.

The surprising connection between serpents and healing was not limited to the Ancient Near East, however. In the Greco-Roman world, there was the Rod of Asclepius. That rod also consisted of a serpent intertwined on a pole. It was the symbol for the Greek god of healing and medicine.

And there was also the caduceus, which was the wand carried by the Roman god Mercury. The wand had two serpents intertwined on it, along with wings. It is said that the caduceus could, among other things, raise the dead back to life.

In fact, we still see this serpent and pole imagery today in many logos for health-related organizations, including the American Medical Association and the World Health Organization. So there remains a strong connection in our collective consciousness between serpents and healing.

But the serpent and pole in today's readings does more than just cure physical sickness. It is also a cure for spiritual sickness. As Jesus mentions in today's gospel reading, the lifting up of a serpent by Moses is a foreshadowing of his own crucifixion.

On Good Friday, Jesus is lifted high upon a cross, just as the bronze serpent is lifted high upon the pole. Paradoxically, it is this lifting up of Jesus that will reverse the fall of Adam and Eve and the sickness of original sin. And it is this lifting up that will lead to our own spiritual healing and eternal life.

As Jesus says in today's gospel reading: "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." In other words, the incarnation is the turning point of salvation history. Because of Jesus, we have turned a corner on our spiritual sickness, theologically speaking. And that is cause for rejoicing on this Laetare Sunday.

Each Friday evening at 6:30 during Lent, we offer the stations of the cross and the benediction of the blessed sacrament. If you have never experienced this beautiful service, I invite you to come and join us here at least one Friday evening before the beginning of Holy Week.

During the stations of the cross, we stand in front of each of the fourteen stations around the church. We accompany Jesus on his journey from the court of Pontius Pilate in the first station, to Golgotha in the twelfth station, to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea in the fourteenth station. We are led, each step of the way, by a crucifier who lifts the crucified Christ high upon a pole.

And at the benediction of the blessed sacrament afterwards, we gaze upon the Body of Christ. The consecrated host is placed in a monstrance, which is lifted up high by the priest at the altar. Like the bronze serpent, the lifting up of the most holy sacrament of the altar is a sign of our spiritual healing in Christ.

We have turned a corner in Lent. Lent is not just a time for suffering and sacrifice. It is also a time to rejoice in the miraculous healing that the Great Physician works in our lives. If sin is understood as a spiritual flu of sorts, then Christ Jesus – like the bronze serpent – is the antidote to our sickness.

It is true that Lent is not yet over. We are not yet out of the wilderness. But the end is in sight. When Jesus is lifted high upon the cross, we too are "raised up with him," as we hear in today's epistle reading from the Letter to the Ephesians. We, who were once dead spiritually, are now "alive together with Christ." And for that, we rejoice on this Laetare Sunday.