

**SNAKES AND SALVATION**  
**Numbers 21:4-9 - John 3:1-16**  
**Preached by Dr. Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, March 18, 2012**

Since both readings from the Scriptures on this fourth Sunday in Lent have something to do with snakes and since yesterday was St. Patrick's Day, Patrick being the one, who legend has it, drove the snakes out of Ireland, I thought I'd begin this morning by talking about the early Celtic missionaries who brought the Gospel of Christ to Ireland in a way Jesus himself would approve.

Unfortunately, the spread of Christianity, immediately after the fall of the Roman Empire, was primarily through war and conquest. Too often tribal kings either cynically used the Christian faith as a tool to help them seize and keep power or mistakenly believed they were doing the Lord's work by forcing conquered populations to be baptized or die. Since old habits die hard, this was the same strategy used by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Conquistadors who gave the Native Americans in Central and South America the same choice: either give up their pagan ways and embrace Christianity or die.

Of course, today we're appalled by this twisted way of evangelism and we know Christ in his heaven must have been shaking his head in deep sadness when he saw all this being done in his name.

But in Ireland, things were different. Isolated and far removed from the turmoil on the continent, the Celtic missionaries humbly followed the example of Jesus of Nazareth by taking on the form of a servant. They emptied themselves of their time, energy and treasure, not for their own glorification and profit, but simply to expand the boundaries of Christ's Kingdom. Following the example of Patrick, his disciples bravely spread out, putting their lives on the line, so Christ and his gospel would transform the life and culture of the people and the land.

Their strategy was simple. They'd move into a village and become part of the community. At first they didn't speak the Christian Gospel instead they lived it, visiting the sick, befriending the lonely and helping their neighbors thatch roofs and bring in the harvest. They asked for nothing in return, made no demands and never acted in any way superior, they simply practiced being kind and gentle but also strong and brave. Claiming the same authority bestowed on the twelve apostles, they too submitted and became Christ-like.

Soon enough someone in the village would start the conversation by asking what motivated their servant lifestyles. Then would they tell the story of Jesus and how his love transformed their lives. Wanting what they had the Irish were converted, born again, and within a generation or two Ireland was thoroughly Christianized.

At the center of their life and practice was Christ himself which is beautifully confirmed in the hymn “St. Patrick’s Breastplate” which may have been composed by the saint, but more probably by his disciples.

Christ be with me, Christ within me  
Christ behind me, Christ before me  
Christ beside me, Christ to win me  
Christ to comfort and restore me  
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger  
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

These humble men and women brought to Ireland and all the British Isles a love for the Scriptures, the desire for the spiritual life through silence and meditation, a deep commitment to the needs of others, especially the poor, and a profound reverence for God’s creation. All these beliefs and practices are central to Christianity and especially appropriate to rediscover during the forty days of Lent as we prepare to enter into Christ’s passion and ponder the profound implications the crucifixion has on Christian belief and practice.

Today’s Gospel reading tells the story of Nicodemus, a good man and one of the highly respected religious leaders living in Judea. Nicodemus was an honest seeker who silently sought out Jesus under the cover of darkness seeking enlightenment. He started the conversation expressing admiration for Jesus, but Jesus ignored the compliment and quickly got down to business saying, “You must be born again to gain eternal life.” Jesus wanted Nicodemus to realize practicing the external laws and rituals to distinguish yourself from nonbelievers isn’t good enough. It’s what happens to you internally that’s important.

Being a serious religious scholar, Nicodemus was already familiar with the concept of being born again, but he seemed to be wondering if an old dog, like himself, could learn new tricks; if an old man who spent his life believing and living one way could be suddenly completely and radically changed to another. He tried to do it himself but he got nowhere. How then could his transformation happen?

Jesus went on to say something strange, maybe not to Nicodemus, but certainly strange to us. Jesus referenced a peculiar story from the Book of Numbers that tells the story of the Hebrews’ complaints against God and Moses as they wandered aimlessly through the wilderness for forty years prior to entering the Promised Land. They groused about being conned into leaving Egypt, forgetting they were enslaved by Pharaoh. They grumbled about moving around from place to place, the shortage of water and the lousy food. Then suddenly something unexpected happened that turned their complaints into cries for help. Poisonous snakes appeared out of nowhere biting indiscriminately whether one complained or not. Immediately they perceived the snakes were sent by God to punish them for their ingratitude and disobedience. Quickly they confessed their lack of trust and sought forgiveness for speaking out against God.

God responded to their repentance in a strange way. Instead of driving the snakes out or stopping the snakes from biting, God instructed Moses to place a bronze serpent on the top of a high pole, so that anyone bitten could look at the bronze serpent and get inoculated from the poison.

Isn't it telling that God didn't take away the snakes? Instead, he let them stay and continue to bite, but the message was clear: the people were totally dependent on God who not only guided and fed them, but now saved them from certain death; this would be a lesson God's people would learn and forget in every generation from that time on. God saves his people, but on his terms.

Thankfully God's terms are more than generous, especially when seen through that mysterious bronze snake in the Old Testament as a metaphor for Jesus in the New Testament.

*“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 has eternal life. For God so loved the world he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life.”* (John 3:14-16)

Keep in mind Jesus is still speaking to Nicodemus. Using the story of Moses and the bronze serpent, for Nicodemus, would not only be familiar but instructive, but perhaps not right away. It's probable when Nicodemus left Jesus, still under the cover of darkness he was more confused than ever. But pondering Jesus' metaphor, especially on Good Friday as he saw Jesus being crucified, something clicked in Nicodemus, he saw the connection between the Jews being healed by gazing up at the serpent and mankind being healed when looking up to the Son of Man, lifted up to die for the world God loves.

This may all sound like foolishness to some. Last Sunday's sermon was based on Paul's observation that many people perceive our claims about the cross to be foolishness and the story of Christ's crucifixion as nothing more than a fairy tale for children and idiots. We believe otherwise because there's a deeper mystery surrounding the cross calling us to enter into his passion. When Christ was lifted up to die an ignominious death, God exalted his son, redeeming his pain and suffering to complete his secret plan for our salvation. Using our disobedience, God saved us through Christ from sin and death, on his terms for our good.

This is the gospel that spread like a wildfire even though the history of the Church wasn't always pure and noble. The entrenched establishment always used the institution to accomplish their ends. But always under the radar countless unnamed disciples and missionaries, simple monks and priests lived authentic Christ-like lives that did more to keep Christianity relevant than anyone but God himself could imagine.

I'd like to close with a story about St. Patrick baptizing a tall and muscular Irish Chieftain in a fast flowing stream. They went out into the water to perform the sacrament. Before he dunked the Irishman under water the Saint firmly planted his staff

in the riverbed to keep his balance. Straight after the baptism, Patrick noticed the Chieftain hobbling on the shore with one of his feet spurting blood.

Patrick cried, “What happened to your foot?”

The tall man looked at Patrick strangely. “You cut my foot when you stabbed it with your staff.”

“Good heavens man,” Patrick sputtered, “why didn’t you tell me?”

Sheepishly he replied, “After what you told me about being baptized into Jesus’ death, I thought it was because baptism is supposed to hurt.”

Sooner than you think is the start of Holy Week, marking Jesus’ final days culminating in his suffering and dying on his cross. When you were baptized into Christ, you were baptized into his death. Sooner or later the time comes when your baptism will hurt as you experience the growing pains of being born again into the reality of Christ and his Kingdom emerging within and around you.

Take your cue from those Celtic missionaries, kind and gentle yet brave and strong, who spent their lives serving God and neighbor trusting they were being held in the same everlasting arms that were stretched taut on the cross. Let us pray.

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