

Lent 5 Year B 2012

Our Gospel passage this morning comes at the end of a long conversation that Jesus is having with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a leader of the Jews who came to Jesus under the cover of night. He was probably afraid of being seen meeting with Jesus. Nicodemus begins this conversation by recognizing that Jesus is a man of God and at the same time he struggles to understand what Jesus means when he tells him that he is born from above. Nicodemus is puzzled and asks Jesus 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born? Jesus talks about water and the Spirit and how the Spirit of God blows where it chooses. Jesus says, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." I think what Jesus is conveying to Nicodemus is that you can't pin down the Spirit of God.

And then in the Gospel we come to what we hear today about Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness and how that connects to Jesus being lifted up to eternal life. The account this morning from the book of Numbers is about how the Israelites became impatient during their wilderness journey and then on top of their impatience they encountered poisonous serpents. They understood the serpents as a punishment for their sins and they ask Moses to pray for them. He does pray and the word he gets from God is to set a poisonous serpent on a pole and to instruct everyone who is bitten to look at it and they would live. So Moses erects a serpent of bronze and puts it upon a pole so that the people might live.

A little searching on the internet let me to the rod of Asclepius which is an ancient symbol associated with astrology, the Greek god Asclepius, and with medicine and healing. It consists of a serpent entwined around a staff. The name of the symbol derives from its early and widespread association with Asclepius, the son of Apollo, who was a practitioner of medicine in ancient Greek mythology. His attributes, the snake and the staff, sometimes depicted separately in antiquity, are combined in this symbol. Hippocrates

himself was a worshipper of Asclepius. And the rod of Asclepius is used today by many medical organizations and services as their logo. You may see it in your local doctor's office or on your doctor's letterhead or business card.

To begin with the serpent and the staff appear to have been separate symbols that were combined at some point in the development of the Asclepian cult. The significance of the serpent has been interpreted in many ways; sometimes the shedding of skin and renewal is emphasized as symbolizing rejuvenation, while other assessments center on the serpent as a symbol that unites and expresses the dual nature of the work of the physician, who deals with both life and death, both sickness and health. The ambiguity of the serpent as a symbol, and the contradictions it is thought to represent, reflect the ambiguity of the use of drugs, which as we all know can help or harm. We can see this reflected in the meaning of the term *pharmakon*, from which we get pharmacy. *Pharmakon* in ancient Greek meant "drug", a "medicine" but it also meant a "poison". Products deriving from the bodies of snakes were known to have medicinal properties in ancient times, and in ancient Greece, at least some were aware that snake venom might be fatal if it entered the bloodstream. Snake venom appears to have been 'prescribed' in some cases as a form of therapy.

The significance of the staff has a variety of interpretations. One view is that it, like the serpent, "conveyed notions of resurrection and healing", while another is that the staff was a walking stick associated with itinerant physicians. We often think of Jesus as an itinerant preacher but as a healer he was also an itinerant physician.

So in the stories today we have Moses instructed by God making a bronze serpent and setting it on a pole to be looked upon and save lives and we have Jesus talking about himself being lifted up in the same way so that those who believe may have eternal life. It would seem that this ancient symbol the rod of Asclepius has been used by ancient people to tell us about a God of life who brings healing and good medicine. An ancient God of mercy whose work has always been for the healing of nations, for the healing of body, mind, and soul,... and who gives us in Jesus the itinerant physician, the

medicine man, the God who continues healing with not only mercy but with love.

Howard Mumma has written this: “To me, to be born again is to enter anew or afresh in the process of spiritual growth. It is to wipe the slate clean. It is to receive forgiveness. It is to receive forgiveness because you have asked God to forgive you of all past sins, so that the guilt, the concerns, the worries, and the mistakes that we have made in the past are forgiven and the slate is truly wiped clean. ... The person who accepts forgiveness now believes that there is no mortgage, no encumbrance on him. The slate is clear, your conscience is clear. You are ready to move ahead and commit yourself to a new life, a new spiritual pilgrimage. You are seeking the presence of God himself.”

Martin Luther wrote in his Exposition of this chapter of John’s Gospel: “Do not think that you will enter the Kingdom of God unless you are first born anew of water and of the Spirit. That is a strong and hard saying, that we must be born anew. It means that we must come out of the birth of sin to the birth of justification; else we shall never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Upon this birth or justification good works must follow. Of these things the Lord Christ speaks much with Nicodemus, but Nicodemus cannot understand, nor can they be understood unless a man has experience of them and has been born of the Spirit.”

I want to end with a story that Joan Chittister tells of an old Sufi dervish who set out to make the Great Pilgrimage to Mecca. It may speak a word or two to you in this moment about your Lenten pilgrimage, where you’ve been, where you are, and then where you have set your sights on going.

It was a difficult journey under any conditions. This particular year the trek was unusually demanding. The large crowds jostled one another and crowded him off the road. The path was rough and uneven. The sun beat down on the old man’s head without mercy.

“I must stop for a while,” the holy one decided.

So he lay down by the side of the road, just outside of Mecca. He was hardly asleep before he felt himself being shaken roughly awake.

“Sufi, get up,” the imam said. The voice was not kind. The hand was not gentle.

“Some Sufi you are,” the stranger went on. “You’re a disgrace!”

The imam circled around the old man, flailing his hands and shaking his head.

“How dare you lie down at the time for prayer,” he shouted, “with head turned to the West and your feet pointed toward God in the holy shrine.”

The old Sufi stirred a bit, opened one eye, looked at the man, and smiled.

“I thank you, sir, for your concern,” the

Sufi said. “So before I go back to sleep,” he went on, a grin playing at the corner of his mouth, “would you be so kind as to turn my feet in some direction where they are not pointing at God?” Amen.

Excerpts taken from Synthesis