



Calvary Presbyterian Church
Sunday, March 10, 2024

Beloved Dust: Lift Higher the Cross

Rev. Eyde Mabanglo

SCRIPTURE READING

John 3:13-21, NIV

¹³No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. ¹⁹This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

MESSAGE

***Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim
till all the world adore his sacred name.***

I kept singing this refrain while I looked into this passage this week.

I thought to myself: *oh, this is why I should really jump into the text a few weeks in advance, so that I can share with Lindsay when ideas of hymns come to mind...*

but when I looked at the verses of this hymn that I learned as a young person, and I was frankly put off...the language of victory is militant and stinks of a triumphalism that makes my heart cringe a smidge. If ever I should be in a worship service where the hymn is central, you will hear me sing out on the refrain, but I may mumble under my breath through the verses...

And when I read about what might have inspired the hymn writer to even craft the lyrics, I bristled again...a smidge. Apparently, his muse for writing the song was the conversion of Constantine who saw in a vision, followed by a dream, the cross of Christ with the words "in hoc signo vinces" inscribed upon it. The Latin phrase means, "in this sign, you will conquer". In other words, the cross means winning. Constantine changed the emblem on his soldier's armor and won a big battle under the sign of the cross. Constantine is remembered as an emperor that lifted up Christianity as a national religion, uniting Rome and gathered the council of Nicaea that penned The Nicene Creed, a creed we have now in our Book of Confessions (the first book of our constitution in the PCUSA).

I bristle because what doesn't get lifted up is the political power play behind the motivation of this emperor, now canonized in the Roman Catholic Church. He lifted high the cross, but to wage and win a war. Yes, he chose Christianity...but he chose Christianity as a way to build a political base to support his empire aspirations. He became a leader in the church to control the religious leaders and the flow of religious teachings. He purposely waited to be baptized on his death bed, so that he could be absolved of all of his wrongdoing during his reign.

I am not a historian, and I may be exaggerating the true motivations of a man I obviously never knew from the 4th century. I, like many of us, have to "google it" to research the context behind things we take as fact. And for the record the Nicene Creed is a brilliant piece of writing and grounds

me in Trinitarian Theology, so I will be forever grateful to whatever role Constantine had in initiating the councils of Nicaea. But throughout history, including our lifetime, we have political leaders who have perpetuated unspeakable evil as they also lift high the cross. And I know many a Christian who espouses to lift high the cross only to bring it down as hard as they can on someone else.

Today is the Oscars. And I am very sad that my "Oscar moms" are not able to enjoy our annual Oscar Watch Party tonight, but in viewing many of the stories depicted in these nominated films...there is so much exposed of the sin in this world...and so much of it done in the name of God...we/humans/Christians lift high the cross while we look down on others. The films, many based on true events, show us our own:

Racism, homophobia, xenophobia, a mental health crisis, gender stereotypes, misogyny, capitalism, socio-economic bias, privilege, abuses of power, murder, colonizing, oppression, infidelity, genocide, gas-lighting, theft, ignorance, arrogance, disdain, and hate.

My plea to you today is that if you intend to lift high the cross in your own life that you lift it higher than the social constructs within our religious institutions, higher than just a simple, watered-down interpretation of a biblical verse taken out of context, higher than a smug, self-righteous view of those outside of the church, higher than your ego, your need to be at center stage, your need to be right, or your need to win.

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The passage begins with a look back to Moses in the desert, leading God's people out of exile. The people of God complained about the conditions around this rescue mission—they didn't like the food or drink or mode of transportation. God sent poisonous snakes. Yikes.

When the people called upon Moses to help. He pleaded their case to God, and God didn't take away the snakes, but made Moses put a bronze serpent on his staff and asked the people to look at it—to look upon their shame, to look upon themselves. He wanted them to look at the symbol of

their sin, to be reminded of their cold hearts and then be healed of their waywardness.

...God's provision of healing in this passage is instructive. Even in our worst failures and disappointments, God provides. God offers healing for our wounds, relationship for our loneliness, and faithfulness for our faithlessness. God doesn't remove the sources of our suffering, but God makes the journey with us, providing what we most deeply need, if we but look in the right direction. (Workingpreacher.com, Elizabeth Webb/Numbers 21:4-9)

The healing nature of snakes has been part of our human story for thousands of years, recorded in ancient folklore, Greek mythology, and our own bible. To this day, the image of snakes wrapped about a stick is a common insignia for the medical profession...some say that it is a way to gaze upon God as the great Physician who offers healing...the cross is about healing, not condemnation.

The bronze serpent is a figure of the Divine Physician: Our Lord on the cross. "And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men to Myself." Saint Ambrose writes that it was a figure of Christ crucified, and of the efficacy of a lively faith in Him against the bites of the hellish serpent (see our origin story in Genesis). And again: As the old serpent infected the whole human race, Jesus Christ gives life to those who look at Him with entire confidence. (Catholicism.org)

Calvary isn't proclaiming the cross as healing the better way than equating the cross with victory...the cross is a reminder of the affliction that we bring upon ourselves, a reminder of the healing provision that God offers in Christ, a victory over evil and death...not the power to win political, territorial or personal vendettas.

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Lift high the cross – what we see is that we human beings are very much the source of our own misery.

... The answer is to look to the cross. God in Christ takes this 'god forsakenness' into his death and transforms it.

(as we read in Ephesians) "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

Despite our ignorance, despite our deliberate waywardness, and despite our plain stupidity the cross says to us that God is with us, and that God has not forsaken even we who would nail God to the cross. This is grace.

As people we are drawn into this grace as we lift high the cross and as we are lifted into living again with hope. Living with hope that sees past our human predicament and the paradox of our rejection of God and seeks to live again led and empowered by the good news that has been revealed to us.

... This is the good news the Son of Man has been lifted up just as the serpent was lifted on the pole in the desert and in the source of our affliction, we also find our healing.

<http://revplockhart.blogspot.com/2015/03/lift-high-cross.html?m=1>

Calvary...

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Lift High the Cross...lift it higher...for all to see...

not just for all to be judged or condemned, but that all would be healed and that all would not die, but that all would know God's love.

Calvary, Let us lift Higher the Cross.

MAY IT BE SO.

