

Numbers 21:4-9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3: 14-21

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 may have eternal life. "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." 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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

Sermon: Croagh Patrick

I hope everyone had a wonderful St. Patrick's Day. Although I have strong memories of my father taking me to the parade in the city and of going to the neighbors apartment to listen to Irish songs like Who Threw the Overalls in Mrs. Murphy's Chowder, I didn't really know anything of my Irish heritage until a few years ago when I met a second cousin on the web and she told me there was a book about our family story called: From Ireland, Land of Pain and Sorrow.

And so in 2007 Eileen and I made a trip to the ancestral home on Clare Island in Clew Bay just off the town of Westport in County Mayo. We spent four days there and then four days in Dublin where we were invited to tea by Paddy and Peggy McKillen, parents of Monika McKillen who lives here in Connecticut. They asked about our trip and we spoke of what we'd learned of Clare Island, how before the potato blight there were 12 hundred people on the Island but after the famine the population dropped to only 14 and it's only 125 even today - at which point tears appeared in Peggy's eyes as if this heartbreak had happened just the day before.

I believe she had the trait that William Butler Yeats observed when he wrote: Being Irish, she had an abiding sense of tragedy, which sustained her through temporary periods of joy.

Perhaps that trait is the reason there is a strand of penitential pain woven into Irish spirituality. When you look east from Clare Island the dominant feature on the horizon is Croagh Patrick, or The Reek as it is called. This is a mountain where tradition says St. Patrick fasted for forty days in 411 AD and built a stone church at the peak. In honor of that fast, every year up to a million pilgrims make their way to Croagh Patrick and on the last Sunday in July you'll find 25,000 climbing the rocky path, many barefoot, for a special Mass celebrated at the summit.

It's not unusual for a hill or a mountain to play an important role in the human experience of God - Think of Moses ascending Mt. Sinai to receive the two tablets of the law, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

Or think of the psalmist who declares
I lift up my eyes to the hills- from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." (Psalm 121:1-2, NRSV)

Or think of the Lord -
The sermon on the mount
The high mountain where he was transfigured
And Calvary's mountain, Golgotha, the place of the skull where they lifted him up on the cross to crucify him according to their cruel and humiliating form of public execution.

I'm sure when the Romans raised Jesus up on that cross they thought that was the end of him. I doubt they were capable of imaging that two thousand years later people would make pilgrimage to Jerusalem just to walk his way of that sorrow and congregations would encircle the globe with their song: On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross.

John's Gospel that we read this morning has a unique view of the crucifixion - John sees it as the turning point of time. Jesus has come down from heaven, as John writes, the Word of God become flesh, but now on Calvary's mountain he is lifted up in glory - the first step in his return to his heavenly dwelling with the Father.

John says this lifting up of Jesus on the cross is for the sake of our healing: 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 may have eternal life. But what is the nature of this healing? And how can Jesus on the cross accomplish this healing for us?

There have been many teachings on this topic: some interpret the crucifixion in terms of the sacrificial worship of the temple and the symbolism of Passover and Jesus being called the Lamb of God.

Others have understood the crucifixion in a judicial framework - in terms of crime and punishment, the obligations of justice. Suffering is seen

as the necessary punishment for sin and Jesus saves us by stepping in to take our place and pay the price - a price which would destroy us.

Yet others have spoken about Jesus as the righteous or innocent one who suffers and whose suffering touches the hearts of all who have eyes to see and brings them to a place of repentance and compassion - the place where God's love breaks through the selfishness of sin and engages people in compassionate works of justice and mercy.

The human heart and mind are a mysterious landscape. We don't always know how events and information will impact our consciousness and affect the way we choose to live our lives. I would suspect that many of us have read about the suffering of so many in Central Africa. Maybe over our morning coffee we glanced at a photo but turned the newspaper page to get past the international news - always bad - and get to sports.

But then someone lifts up a single story - a Ugandan named Jacob whose brother was killed by the Lord's Resistance Army led by Joseph Kony. A movie is made and posted on the web and the next thing you know it has been viewed almost a hundred million times - it's on every major news show and in every major newspaper. I don't know if it has been the best tool for solving the problem in that region - it certainly appears it was not the best thing for the filmmaker Jason Russell - but it illustrates how this lifting up of the suffering of the innocent has a power to pierce into our hearts and overcome our inertia and mobilize our energy for justice and change.

Not that any of us would have thought the situation for the children in Uganda or South Sudan or the Republic of Congo was anything but evil - but we put fences up around our field of vision - we prioritize, we develop a bit of callousness so as not to get drawn in to every sad situation. And this allows some to really be hard of heart and practically psychopathic in their self-aggrandizement and manipulation of others to their own benefit. This goes on at every imaginable level of intensity until something takes place that creates conversion, a complete change of heart and mind so we can no longer ignore and refuse to accept the suffering of the status quo -

I don't know that anyone can predict where the tipping point comes in the process of conversion. When Martin Luther King led the struggle against racism and for equal rights he had a strong faith that if people stood up for themselves and non-violently asserted their basic human dignity and if they were made to suffer for this stand, then that suffering would be the catalyst to change this country.

In one sermon he spoke of his personal suffering - twelve times in jail in Alabama and Georgia - his home bombed twice - and he said: "I have lived these last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive. There are some who still consider the Cross a stumbling block, others consider it foolishness, but I am more convinced than ever before that it is the power of God unto social and individual salvation."

But how long, O Lord, how long?

Dr. King spoke of that faith in 1960, five years after the Montgomery Bus Boycott and three years before a series of photographs from Birmingham Alabama were spread across the pages of Life Magazine and seared the conscience of the nation and helped it come to the moment of conversion in the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

These iconic images were captured by Charles Lee Moore, a former United States Marine photographer who was working Montgomery, Alabama for the Montgomery Advertiser, in 1958 when he took a picture of an argument between Martin Luther King, Jr. and two policemen. From then on Moore traveled throughout the South documenting the Civil Rights Movement. He bore witness to the struggle and lifted up the suffering and helped people come to their senses and open their hearts and repent the racism which was written into the tablets of law in our land, although most certainly not by the finger of God.

The suffering of the innocent, the hunger of the poor, the oppression of the powerless - this is where we see the cross of Christ casting a long shadow across the scope of human history. It would be a victory for sin if we turned aside, closed our eyes, hardened our hearts, and refused to take it in. For 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. "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."