

LOOK AND LIVE
Sermon for Lent 4B-Num 21:4-9, Jn 3:14-21
LPC, 3/11/18

In a previous life, I was an assistant in a small, private preschool that had only one other teacher, the head of the school. One day the head sent out a notice to the parents that she was closing the school the following Friday so that she could be with her own little girl who would have surgery that day. The day the notice went out happened to be a day when the head had to leave early, so I was the only one on duty when parents came to pick up their children.

One mother came sailing across the yard like a battleship on the attack. She proceeded to lambast me for the projected school closing, claiming a contractual understanding that there would be a certain number of school days for each month's tuition.

Taken off guard I quietly suggested that she take the matter up with the head, as I had no authority in the matter. The woman became more irate, yelling at me and carrying on. I just kept repeating, "Take it up with the head." The woman only stopped when her child started tugging impatiently on her coat. Taking the little girl by the hand, she turned on her heel and swept away in evident disgust with me.

Later, I got a call from the head, who had spoken with the woman. Evidently the woman told the head that I had been rude to her, raising my voice and making her feel small. I was aghast. The woman had evidently projected onto me all of her own bad behavior. Fortunately the head believed me and dropped the matter with me to concentrate on appeasing the angry mother.

I have never forgotten how easy it seemed to be for this woman to convince herself that I had been rude, when the rudeness was all on her part. After observing a similar phenomenon on other occasions with other people, I have concluded that people sometimes do project their own faults onto other people. I expect they do this because associating fault with themselves is just too painful. Something bad happens – we can't bear to think of ourselves as bad, so the other person must be bad.

I can't help but think that this is going on in a lot of the contentious interchange we see on social media and elsewhere these days. Everyone seems to be accusing each other of bad faith, bad politics, bad thinking and bad living. Knowing human nature, it's not hard to imagine why. As long as we can accuse someone else we can put off examining our own responsibility.

This common human situation may be a way of understanding today's very strange story from the book of Numbers. This story takes place during the Exodus. Moses has led the people of Israel out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and into the wilderness, where at the time this story takes place the Israelites are in the middle of their 40-year sojourn pending their admittance to the land God has promised them.

The people have become frustrated and impatient. They project their anger onto Moses and onto God. In their anger they forget that without Moses and without God they would still be enslaved in Egypt. They seem to have forgotten how miserable they were as slaves and how badly they had wanted to leave. Like many angry people they exaggerate how bad things are for

them. They claim they are dying in the wilderness. They clearly are not. Not yet. They claim they have no food and water, although God has provided both. Then they even give themselves the lie by claiming to detest the very food they have just said they don't have.

So the Bible tells us God sends a plague of poisonous serpents. It's problematic to think of God sending pain, destruction and death among God's people. That may be how things looked to Bronze Age people, but I have trouble reconciling this idea of God with the one who so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life. I think the important thing to take from this part of the story is that the people have brought misfortune on themselves by their lack of faith.

They have claimed to be dying in the wilderness when that is not the case. But when they really start dying, the Israelites come to their senses and repent their faithlessness, appealing to Moses to intercede with God, which Moses does. This is pretty nice of Moses considering how unfair and disloyal they have been to him.

What God tells Moses then is a curious thing. Moses is to make a replica in bronze of the creatures that are tormenting the people and put it on a pole so that everyone "may look at it and live." Moses obeys and sure enough the people who look, live.

It is said that naming the problem is half the solution. Admitting we have a fault is the first step in healing. This is true in this instance for the people of Israel. When they look upon the bronze serpent, it's like they are seeing their own fault for the first time. They are facing their own anger and failure and taking responsibility for it instead of projecting it falsely onto Moses and onto God. And in this there is healing and salvation.

As Jesus points out in today's Gospel lesson from John, this is also what will happen in the Crucifixion. Our own failings and sin have been projected onto Jesus. When we look at Jesus on the cross we are able to see our own failings and sin. And this is the first step in our healing and salvation. We are freed from the illusion of blaming others for everything bad by honestly facing our own limitations, perhaps for the first time.

Lent is a time to face our own anger, failings, limitations, impatience, frustrations, sin. Lent is a time to look upon the serpents who torment us through our own fault and know they are our responsibility.

But it is also a time to remember that when we look upon the serpents we have called upon ourselves we are freed and healed through Jesus Christ, who came into the world not to condemn but to save.

For so God loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Look and live.