

Title: Drawn to the Cross

Date: 3/10/2024 (Lent 4, Year B)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10 am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings [Numbers 21:4-9](#); [Ephesians 2:1-10](#); [John 3:14-21](#); [Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22](#)

Audio Link: <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/st-albans-austin/episodes/Lent-4-Drawn-to-the-Cross-e2h3iuj>

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/6fFdotNadHA?t=1137>

We give you thanks, O God, for you are good;  
your mercy endures for ever.

Let all those whom you have redeemed proclaim  
that you redeemed them from the hand of the foe.

You gathered [us] out of the lands,  
from the east and from the west,  
from the north and from the south.

(Ps 107:1-3, St. Helena Psalter)

Amen.

I spent most of this week at the annual conference for the Episcopal Parish Network. Some 650 clergy and lay leaders from over 200 parishes of all budgets and sizes gathered for four days at the Houston Galleria. The speakers were inspiring, and it was great to be reminded that the reports of the death of mainline Protestant denominations are greatly exaggerated.

To be clear, this doesn't mean that we as The Episcopal Church or we as St. Alban's are not facing any challenges. Someone said that big churches and small churches face similar problems; the difference is in the number of zeroes required to solve it. We are not the only church that passed a deficit budget; we are not the only church that has to constantly repair and refresh our space.

The trick is that the questions and answers for each church are different. We are rooted in different places and are made up of different people who live in different neighborhoods and bring different spiritual gifts. What flourishes in Houston may not work in Austin; what works for Calvary in Bastrop may not work for St. Alban's.

In a sense, the good news is that there is **not** a universal solution that we aren't smart enough to figure out. There's not a well-honed strategy that we haven't worked hard enough or raised enough money to make real. Yesterday, a panel of lay leaders reminded all of us, lay **and** clergy, that "We just have to take the next faithful step" and "Pacing and patience are key."

Pacing and patience fall under the category of "Lessons I have to keep re-learning." In my ideal world, I make a plan, I execute the plan, and voila, I get the results I want. That's the way the world works, right?

Notice that the word “I” appears many times in that sentence. So, when things don’t happen right away or don’t unfold the way I hoped, it’s easy to fall into the trap of thinking the reason is that *I’m* not smart enough or that *I’m* not working hard enough.

The same panelists that reminded me about pacing and patience also said, “Find peers” and “Don’t do this alone.” These are antidotes to losing hope.

Speaking of antidotes (how do you like THAT transition?), what about that reading from the Old Testament?

This is the last of what scholars call the “murmuring stories.” Murmur is the academic term for “constantly complaining.” God, through Moses, has led the Israelites out of Egypt, and they just cannot stop grumbling. First there was the bitter water, then the lack of food, the lack of water, the lack of meat, and the prospect of invading Canaan.<sup>1</sup>

This time, they said, “Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food **and** no water.” Realizing they’re being a little overdramatic, they correct themselves. There **is** food, just not the food they want.

Up until now, they blamed their leaders, their leaders prayed to God on their behalf, and God met their needs. This time, not only do they decide to speak against their leaders, they speak against **God**. In response, God sent poisonous serpents among the people to bite them, and many died.

Let’s take a pause here. I wonder if this is something God did, or if they’ve made God in their image, as in this is what **they** would do if they were in God’s place. I wonder if we might make similar complaints if we were in their place, if the steady flow of food and water that came with slavery could outweigh the fear of instability that comes with liberation and the burden of making our own choices. I wonder if they’ve wandered into a part of wilderness with poisonous snakes, and rather than accept that, they decided to blame it on God.

This also reminds me that there were people who argued that slaves would be much better off if they stayed on plantations than if they had to scrape together a living on their own.

If the slaves had such a great life, I wonder how many of the people making that argument would actually trade places with them. Sometimes it’s easier to cast blame than to admit wrong or to put in the effort to deal with the nuances and complexities of big problems.

In this case, God presents a solution to Moses. God tells him to take a serpent and set it on a pole.

This brings to mind that early in my days at St. Alban's, one piece of advice I got was to always walk the labyrinth with closed-toe shoes...because snakes have been spotted there. Now, I don't *think* anyone has been bitten, but that's no reason to not be careful.

A few months later, we had a AED/First Aid workshop, and someone mentioned this to the instructor. He immediately told us that if we are ever bitten, we should try to identify the snake or remember what it looks like. The reason is that there isn't a universal anti-venom. For example, rattlesnake antivenom wouldn't be effective for someone who was bitten by a cobra.<sup>2</sup> If we know the species, then the hospital can give us anti-venom specific to that snake.

These memories help me understand the connection between today's readings in a different way. It always seemed strange and kind of disrespectful that we would compare Jesus to a snake. But given that God didn't tell Moses to catch a snake, God told Moses to make a snake, perhaps we can think of Jesus as the anti-venom.

Moses lifted up that snake as high as he could so that the most people could see it in the shortest amount of time possible. Had he left it on the ground, many more people would have died. Likewise, Jesus predicted that "the Son of Man must also be lifted up, that whoever believes in him shall have eternal life."

When we seek Jesus, we find ourselves gathered around the cross. When we look for him, we find each other. Think about all the denominations that went to Jerusalem and the Holy Land to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. They didn't want to just sit at home and read a book about him; they wanted to be where he was, in the same place.

As a result, they start running into each other. These are people who come from different cultures and have different ways of following Jesus. This can get really really hard. How hard is it? The keys to one of the holiest sites in Christianity is not held by Christians because they needed a neutral party.<sup>3</sup> The key to the Holy Sepulchre, the church that stands on the spots where Jesus was said to have been crucified and buried, is held by a Muslim family. This place was so important that all these denominations wanted to be **there**, so they found ways to coexist.

Another speaker this week suggested two ways for us to deal with the divisiveness among us.<sup>4</sup> First, he encouraged us to suspend judgment, to take the time to allow the sediment settle so there is more clarity. Second, he suggested that we see the walls we run into as mirrors... that we see walls...as mirrors. Our reaction to them tells us something about ourselves.

Our reaction to them tells us A LOT about ourselves, if we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

Recently, I read that another translation for being saved is to be made whole, that salvation is not about clouds and harps **after** death, but wholeness in **this** lifetime.

**Perhaps God draws us together through Jesus so we can be and become whole together.** Through his death and resurrection and ascension, he turned a symbol of violence and death into one of hope, he turned us away from division toward wholeness. Jesus is the anti-venom because of who he is and how he lived. Jesus is the antidote because he shows us the potential of our humanity.

No matter how often we turn away, no matter how much we bow our heads in hopelessness, when our eyes come back to the cross, we see Jesus. We see the best of us, the best that is already within us, even when we feel broken, even when we think we've gone too far to turn back. No matter how often we turn away, when our eyes come back to the cross, we see each other. We turn walls into mirrors, **and** we remind ourselves that we don't have to do this life thing alone, that we aren't meant to go at it alone.

When we believe in Jesus, we will seek to experience the kind of wholeness that is possible with God's help. When we believe in Jesus, we will not believe that we are condemned to brokenness, and we will not condemn the world to division. When we believe, we will remember that God gave us the best of God, in Jesus and in creating us, all of us, in the image of God.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Sibley Towner, "[Exegetical Perspective on Numbers 21:4-9.](#)" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 99.

<sup>2</sup> <https://askdruniverse.wsu.edu/2023/05/18/snake-venom-antivenom/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/26/middleeast/easter-muslim-keyholder/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia, <https://www.saintthomaschurch.org/parish-life/connect/whos-who/>