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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X10
Evensong 14 – Readings for 4 Lent Year B
Thursday 30 March 2017

Ps 107:1-3, 17-22
Numbers 21:4-9
John 3:14-21

Seeking 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” (Jn. 3).

We face a shared spiritual crisis. There is a kind of bitterness, a poison in our public life. High levels of distrust and resentment lie behind cataclysmic changes like the possible abolition of the National Endowment for the Arts (and Humanities) and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. As a nation we have begun breaking our international commitments to slow climate change, and dismantling the regulatory agencies responsible for clean air and water.

Arlie Hochschild our Forum guest this Sunday writes that the political right has moved further right over the last four decades. She says that, “Across the country, red states are poorer and have more teen mothers, more divorce, worse health, more obesity, more trauma-related deaths, more low-birth-weight babies, and lower school enrollment...Red states suffer more... industrial pollution.”¹

She writes that the people she met in these places, “felt like victims of a frightening loss – or was it theft? – of their cultural home, their place in the world, and their honor.”²

I am not saying that politics is the cause of these problems, or that these problems lead people to vote in a certain way. I am pointing out what is now obvious – we have become two peoples with a very different way of seeing the world.

Hochschild writes that we have become divided by an “empathy wall.” She defines this an obstacle to deep understanding of another person. It can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to someone who holds different beliefs. She writes about our tendency to “shoe horn information into ways we already think.”

She asks, “is it possible without changing our beliefs, to know others from the inside, to see reality through their eyes, to understand the links between life, feeling and politics; that is, to cross the empathy wall?”³

The people of Israel sent scouts ahead into the Promised Land because they did not trust that God would really provide a safe place for them. This unreasonable doubt led them to return to the wilderness. But as they wandered, they suffered and ultimately complained about God and Moses. They even felt a kind of Make America Great Again nostalgia for their life in slavery.

Then God sent poisonous snakes and the Israelites started dying. In response Moses prayed to God for help. It wasn't enough just to take the snakes away. God wanted to heal those who had been bitten. And so Moses made an image of the snake and put it on a pole. When the people saw this image they were healed. Today the pole and snake are the symbol of the medical profession.

In the Gospel of John Jesus uses this example to describe our situation with God. We are like those Israelites who have been bitten by snakes and are dying from the poison. We may have all that we need to eat, warm enough clothing to wear, even a roof over our heads but this is not enough. We need to feel as if we are okay, as if our life has meaning, that our contribution to this whole thing matters.

Jesus' point is simple. "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" (Jn. 3). Like the snake on the pole Jesus' death on the cross heals us.

Jesus shows us another way. We can find a deep security. We can have a sense of fulfillment that lies beyond our fantasies that happiness comes from the power to dominate other. We can let people who are different from us be who they really are. We can even, to some extent or other, give ourselves away.

Our greatness does not come from our political beliefs, or our ability to work hard. It does not come from a comparison with someone else. We are great when we see the Lord's suffering. We are great when we see life beyond the empathy wall. We are great because we are becoming God's children.

¹ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (NY: The New Press, 2016) 7-9.

² *Ibid.*, 48.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.