**4 Lent, March 15, 2015, Num 21: 4-9; Ps 107;Eph 2:1-10; John 3:14-21; Rev. Mary Trainor**

My backpack on my back and my boots on my feet, there I was walking along the dusty trail with beautiful red-rock sandstone mesas above me. I loved hiking in New Mexico, but twice while hiking I encountered rattlesnakes along the dusty trail. They were minding their own business, but I vividly remember those two snakes and am thankful neither of them struck out with their poisonous fangs. In a recent Harris survey about the #1 fear people have, 36% responded that snakes were their #1 fear. There are a lot of things to fear (e.g, public speaking, illness, death, accidents, war, etc.), so wow -- 36% saying snakes as their #1 fear is a lot! Some people who love Wisconsin say they love it here mainly because we don't have poisonous snakes (there are a few, however, in the extreme SW of our state)! The fear of snakes even has a clinical diagnostic name = **Ophidiophobia**. What are you most afraid of?

St. Patrick, whose feast day we celebrate the day after tomorrow, is often represented in pictures standing on snakes. He is given credit for having singlehandedly chased snakes out of Ireland. The a legend goes like this: Patrick was on a 40 day fast on top of a hill, and he was attacked by a bunch of snakes; he chased them all into the sea, and never again were there any snakes in Ireland. It is a good story, but apparently the truth is that there have never been any snakes in Ireland -- it is a place like New Zealand, Iceland, and Greenland, where there just have never been any of these slithering reptiles.

Snakes played a role in two of our Scripture readings this morning. In our Old Testament reading, God has been putting up with the Israelites complaining for months and months - and He has had enough of their ingratitude. We are told that "***the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many...died***." Wow. How awful that must have been! The word "***serpent***" here means a "fiery snake," a snake that leaves a burning sensation when it bites. When people get bitten by snakes, they are quickly brought to their senses; they repent of their sins, they plead for help. This is just what the Israelites did, and maybe this is what God was looking for here. Moses heard their plea, he prayed to the Lord, and the Lord answered. God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and lift it up on a pole; if people who had been bitten looked at it, they would live. Moses was obedient to God, and the bitten people who obeyed lived and learned.

The symbolism here is that healing was brought through the very thing that caused the death; the lifted up bronze serpent became the cure. Does this image of a snake around a pole seem familiar to you? It is the "caduceus," the symbol for medical healing; you see it on the cars of people in health professions. Some people turn to the medical profession with all their hope, and certainly health care professionals do important work for us. Or maybe you turn to friends, or family members, or hobbies, or recreation, or food or alcohol to lift you up. In our lives in this culture, we look in lots of directions to be lifted up out of the difficulties of life-- but none of those things I just listed can lift us up like God can. That is why Jesus came. In today's Gospel Jesus, talking about Himself, said "***Just as Moses lifted up the serpent, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life***." We too are offered new life through the very thing that caused death: the cross of Christ. In Lent, we journey through the passion and death of Jesus on the way to the resurrection, on the way to Easter.

This lifting up that Jesus does for us is all about love. Today's Gospel includes the most well known verses: "***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***." As Bishop Matt said in his new blog: " **Jesus did not say *God so loved the world* –“except for you” or “except for this person or that person**." **God delights in you. God delights in me. God delights in those we find hardest to bear. God delights in those who find *us* hard to bear. And God delights in those with whom we disagree....*God so loved the world*.**” God lifts us up!

Following a recent sermon by Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber at a Madison church, a woman in tears spoke up. She said to all present, "**I am unable to forgive myself, because I have been told so many times I am unforgivable.**" Bolz-Weber responded: "**Maybe for as many times as you've been told that, you need to hear that God is gracious, and merciful, and slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and loves you as you are. And as a called and ordained minister of the church and by Christ's authority, I declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins."** The congregation responded, "**Amen**." This is what happens here every Sunday -- when we make our confession, we share with God our sins, and at the absolution time right afterwards, God lifts us up with His love and absolute forgiveness. ***For God so loved the world***.....

Lent is the season when we face ourselves, when we face our fears. What in today's Scriptures, in this sermon spoke to your heart today? Did the Light of Christ touch you somewhere and reveal anything? Maybe there is a place of fear or shame inside you that is holding you back from allowing Jesus to lift you up. Today is the day to allow Jesus' Light in, to be lifted up. In our Eucharistic Prayer, which we will say in a few minutes, we use the word "lift" twice: I will say "**Lift up your hearts"** and you will respond "**We lift them up unto the Lord**." You might have said those words many times before and never thought of the word: lift as being anything significant, but oh my, it is significant. If you chose to say "**We lift them up unto the Lord**" you are saying that you are lifting your heart to Jesus, to God who loves you so, who has forgiven you, who has offered you salvation by grace through faith. Will you chose to leave those things in the dark shadows of your insides, or will you chose to bring them to the Light, the truth of Christ? Will you look up to the cross, and lift your heart to Christ and then allow Christ to lift you up to Him? I pray that you do. God **so** loves you! Amen.