



Icons and Serpents

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Numbers 24:4-9; John 3:14-21

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Here we are in this religious space, this holy set apart place of St Matthew-in-the City. If we'd been able to keep to the plans made for Lent we'd be talking about art in the form of icons after church today. Lock down time has changed that arrangement, which is fine. If we've learned nothing else from the last year we've learned the necessity of adapting and adjusting. Even as we're still trying to figure out how to live in a world of shifting sand uncertainty that makes a mockery of the identity we're in the habit of constructing of best made plans.

So today we were to speak of icons in this religious space, how many of you know much about icons? How many of you have a cell phone? If you by chance have one with you, which may be on silent, I want you to extricate it from its hiding place. I want you to look at the screen and tell me what you see. Do you have a series of, for want of a better word, electronic buttons that you touch in order to activate an app? Do you have series of icons on your screen? So we do know something about icons. We know that if we touch an icon it's going to take us to an application, we expect the application to do particular things, access information or connect us to a community or perform some sort of function. Doubtless as we consider, look at each icon on our screen it will evoke a response in us – that relates to the function of the application behind it. The icon simply points us to the application but as we develop relationship with the application, the icon that simply points can come to evoke a

response in us. You could imagine how it would be easy enough for the icon to displace the application, for you to associate the icon as the application.

Perhaps something if this gets expressed in the uneasy relationship the protestant tradition has had to reconcile itself to the presence and place of religious icons. Yet icons have been a Christian religious expression for a long time, the oldest icons date back to the 6th century. Traditionally icons are said to be written rather than painted, much like a scribe transcribing scripture. Early monasteries and schools of iconography developed an expansive visual language and comprehensive doctrine and dogma as to what was an icon and what was required for an icon to be a sacred image. Never intended to be idolized, icons are rather venerated. Considered to be devotional objects, icons are as windows to help focus on the divine during prayer, windows opening to the divinity of those portrayed.

With icons in mind I was intrigued by the readings set for today. Firstly we hear of the Israelites mid their forty year wilderness traverse. They're a bit fed up, tired, thirsty, hungry and sick of the same miserable food. So they're grumbling about it - better the devil we knew in Egypt than this devil of wilderness we don't, you might say. For their troubles they're rewarded, according the text, by the Lord, with **worse** troubles - serpents that bite kill the people. Humbly repentant they plead for Moses to intercede and, this is the weird thing, when Moses does so he's instructed to make an idol, an image of the serpent that's killing them. To hold this image, a sculpted serpent up before the people. And instruct the people if bitten they're to look to the image, face the very thing that's killing them, in so doing they'll live. As if facing that which kills, when in obedience to divine command, invokes the divine - the Lord and this voids the ultimate destructive power of the serpent.

We then hear John's gospel echo this imagery and ethos. The writer of John invokes this image of the serpent Moses lifted up in the wilderness and likens it to the Son of Man being lifted up. But let's

pause a moment, in the wilderness story the serpent kills. The **image** of the serpent is the means by which people live. So what are we to make of John invoking the Son of Man in this way? Does it direct us to think of the Son of Man as a source of death or of life?

In the wilderness the serpents were real time living creatures that killed. If we were to follow where John's analogy directs us we might ask: in our time what does a real time living Son of Man look like? And is it bringing life or denying it?

Inevitably what we hold up or uphold as divine will be familiar - we tend to create things in our own image. It's not **wrong** for us to do so. With best intention we create such image, composite of all we've learned, of our desire for the way the world could be, the way we story the divine in our lives. If we were to pause and reflect like as not we'll see revealed more about who we are or want to be.

But the Son of Man that is to be held up in John's gospel is the One we put to death, the One of light too searching for us to bear living with. **This** Son of Man we're urged to look to and through. This Son of Man reveals a way to live aligned with the source and energy of life, then our living will bring life and us to life. It may be simpler that we imagine so far more difficult

As we know, here in this holy place we're traversing the season of Lent. A season we hear words like penitence, repentance and metanoia. Words that suggest we have the capacity to discern how our living is oriented and that we can choose: to continue as usual or walk other-wise. If we meander the Christian way we sometimes speak of God as one who companions us. To speak this way expresses a sense, perhaps our experience that we journey, we meander with that which other than us, knowable yet eluding our capture, seen yet seen through. A choice to walk other-wise opens us up to this. In this opening up season of penitent metanoia, instead of imagining a God who is doing something to us can we imagine, rather, we're choosing to let something undo in us? Undo

that which stops us from opening to life, from trusting we can live transparently with the flow of life in creation.

Transparency seems a word for today: of icons as windows transparent to the divine; of looking to and through serpent sculpture or Son of Man held up to the divine, the source of life; of Lenten invitation to let something undo in us in opening transparency to the divine flow of life. Today we're to learn of the art of stained glass window making, a medium that uses transparency to tell Jesus' stories in image and colour. A teaching tool when literacy was rare. Through the forms and shapes, the landscape and colours of the natural world, stained glass windows communicate meaning and tell story. Admittedly the one paying for the window influenced who appeared, how the story was told and the symbolism imbued in it. Windows are a transparent barrier to the outside, they reveal as much as they conceal, both from outside in and inside out. Without light the story they tell cannot be revealed - there seems a metaphor for us in that.

Seasons such as Lent offer us opportunity to consider again: who we are, how we live, to what end and for whom. It's not required of us, it's an invitation, we can choose. That season of such ethos continues to exist within the regular framework, the rhythm and cycle of each turning year suggests or perhaps names a need in us. For self-reflection, to reset, reorient, be reconciled. Religious lineages such as Christianity speak of opening ourselves to God. The creative genius of the artist, in collaboration with divine impetus sheds light, opens us to see in other ways, invites and invokes us to respond to what we thought we knew other-wise. In remaining present, in willing transparency to the one to whom we open ourselves over time transforms the way we see, the way we see ourselves, the way we are seen. By so doing could it be we come to reveal more eloquently God's self in creation.