

Lent 4B
Peace, Seattle
March 11, 2018
Numbers 21, Eph 2, John 3

MIRROR OF DEATH, MIRROR OF LIFE

In the fairy tale SNOW WHITE, the conceited queen turns to her magic mirror and asks:
MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL, WHO'S THE FAIREST ONE OF ALL?¹

The mirror responds: YOU, MY QUEEN, ARE FAIREST OF ALL.
And the queen is satisfied...for the moment. Proud and arrogant, she longs for confirmation of her beauty. Little else matters.

When, one day, the mirror speaks of another more beautiful than her, the queen is filled with a jealous rage that consumes her, and ultimately leads to her undoing.

What the mirror doesn't say, you and I both know:

No outward beauty can mask the selfish striving that darkens her heart.

When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

The first thing my eyes find is what I'd rather not see:

- a receding hairline,
- multiplying gray hairs,
- age spots and worry lines.

When I look beneath the surface, I sometimes see a person I like...while at other times I see someone I don't like at all.

If you're like me, much of the time, the person you see when you gaze in the mirror is a very ambiguous character.

Why all this talk about mirror gazing? It starts with this oddball story from the book of Numbers.

Let's remember the context: God has liberated the Hebrew people from captivity under Pharaoh and they're making their way through the wilderness toward the Promised Land.

We've been tracking this WILDERNESS JOURNEY throughout this season, imagining ourselves on this wilderness way with our spiritual ancestors. And we've been reflecting on how experiences of wilderness can catch us by surprise and come to totally dominate our lives individually and collectively.

This was Israel's experience. This wilderness road was not at all what they expected. Trusting God to care for them, it turns out, was no easy matter.

WHY HAVE YOU BROUGHT US OUT OF EGYPT ONLY TO DIE IN THE WILDERNESS!
WE'RE STARVING FOR FOOD AND DYING OF THIRST!

It's about then that the snakes make their appearance, and people start dying left and right.

¹ The Brothers Grimm <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm053.html>

Now the snake is one of those ancient symbolic creatures that stands for life and death at one and the same time.

- On the one hand, it has a bite that kills.
- On the other hand, its ability to shed its old skin and grow a new one gives it the aura of immortality.

In spite of its deadly potential, the snake is a symbol of fertility, rebirth, transformation, and healing.

What all this means is the serpents in our lesson are thoroughly ambiguous creatures.

Where am I going with this? I wonder if this snake business in our text isn't so much about God taking vengeance on the complainers as it is about God holding up a mirror to them?

And this mirror? It doesn't lie. It reflects the people's burning resentments, their poisonous distrust, and a lack of faith that, both symbolically and literally, kills.

Thrust into the wilderness by the hand of God, Israel had to learn a radical trust in God, and that's a hard thing to do because radical trust in God is in no way obvious. "Most of us," writes Henri Nouwen, "distrust God...Most of us think of God as [either] a fearful, punitive authority or as an empty, powerless nothing."

It took Israel 40 years—a whole generation—to learn to trust God, and that was just the beginning! How long has it taken you to learn to trust God? Are you still working on it? So I am.

When the people in our story experience distrust's bitter bite, it doesn't take them long to admit the truth: WE HAVE SINNED AGAINST YOU, LORD! PLEASE! HELP US FIND A WAY!

HELP US FIND A WAY! Isn't that our cry, too?

Whether the wounds we've experienced are self-inflicted or the product of circumstances beyond our control, aren't we all searching for a way through life's desert places? For an unambiguous path toward healing and wholeness?

St. Paul writes:

YOU WERE DEAD THROUGH THE TRESPASSES AND SINS IN WHICH YOU ONCE LIVED,
FOLLOWING THE COURSE OF THIS WORLD... ALL OF US ONCE LIVED THIS WAY AND
WE WERE BY NATURE CHILDREN OF WRATH, LIKE EVERYONE ELSE.

"The truth of the matter is," says Paul, "when you looked into the mirror what stared back at you was death and condemnation."

BUT THE STORY DOESN'T END HERE. Paul goes on:

BUT GOD, WHO IS RICH IN MERCY, OUT OF THE GREAT LOVE WITH WHICH HE LOVED US
EVEN WHEN WE WERE DEAD THROUGH OUR TRESPASSES, MADE US ALIVE TOGETHER
WITH CHRIST AND RAISED US UP WITH HIM. FOR BY GRACE YOU HAVE BEEN SAVED
THROUGH FAITH, AND THIS IS NOT YOUR OWN DOING; IT IS THE GIFT OF GOD.

This, my friends, is Good News! Because of God's free gift in Jesus, the mirror on the wall no longer accuses us, no longer condemns us, no longer seeks to slay us. Instead, it has become our ally.

For the truth we see there, the truth that used to bind us, has become, through God's mercy in Jesus, the truth that sets us free!

In our gospel Jesus takes up these themes and brings them to the finish line:

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.

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.

The Cross, the instrument of torture and agony reserved for the worst criminals and enemies of the state—the death-dealing Cross with Jesus of Nazareth nailed upon it—has become—incomprehensibly and irrevocably—our salvation, our healing, our wholeness, our life.

The Creator of the universe could have done this saving work in any number of ways. But God chose to take on human flesh—to become one with us even to the point of death, so that, having defeated death through his rising, he would bring us with himself to the life that has no end.

As we stand side by side with Christ, looking in the mirror no longer causes us to cringe or to fear. For now we see ourselves as he sees us—as beloved children of immeasurable worth.

Behold what manner of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called the children of God! And that is what we are!

The unlovable features that once lurked on the inside? GONE! Love is all that remains.

Sisters and Brothers, it turns out that the God whom Jesus shows us is neither a powerless weakling nor a powerful tyrant, but a Lover, whose deepest desire is to give us life—abundant and eternal!

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD...

When we turn our faces toward Christ's cross what we see is not a God of wrath and condemnation, or a destructive tyrant but a Lord who offers new life in the midst of death. New life for us individually, and new life for our community.

The next time you see your face in the mirror, with all its ambiguity, with all its stories, with all the tracks and traces that life has laid down; look at it through the eyes of Christ the Savior.

And as you do, let all that worries you about the road ahead take a back seat to the profound reality of God's love embracing you and the world through the outstretched arms of Jesus.

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT ALL MIGHT HAVE A NEVER ENDING RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. This is God's prayer, God's yearning for you, for me, and for all.

Receive it, trust it, and live it. Amen.