

Lent 4 Year B 2009

Rejoice, O Jerusalem: and come together all you that love her: rejoice with joy, you that have been in sorrow: that you may exult, and be filled from the breasts of your consolation.

AMEN.

This, the Fourth Sunday of Lent, is called *Lætare* (Rejoice) Sunday, from the first words of the liturgy [Introit] above. Since it is in the middle of Lent, like *Gaudete* Sunday midway through Advent, *Lætare* reminds us of the Event we look forward to at the end of the penitential season. As on *Gaudete* Sunday, rose-colored vestments may be worn, symbolizing, the Church's joy in anticipation of the Resurrection. The form of *laetari* is the 2nd singular imperative (it's a deponent, not an active verb, so the form looks passive but means you, you, rejoice. So we need to rejoice, and understand that Lent is leading to the resurrection, that these lessons are actually upbeat; we need to understand what Moses did, and look up and understand God's sign of mercy to all. We need to lighten up, and rejoice that as Jesus is lifted up, so whoever believes in him will have eternal life.. "But Indiana Jones identifies our simple problem: "I hate snakes, Jock. I hate 'em.

Jock: C'mon, show a little backbone, will ya?

And again in "Raiders of the Lost Ark," Indy says later, "Snakes. Why'd it have to be snakes?" For us—what a way to illustrate God's mercy: "Why'd it have to be snakes?"

For us, snakes are a perduring sign of creepiness, evil, or even sin. The serpent is both blamed for luring Eve, and then the Lord says: 'Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.' We don't really distinguish between biblical serpents and snakes. True, the serpent may represent Satan, but surely the serpent is the same creature as a snake— or seems to be for us as Christians.

But maybe not in Jewish culture, and maybe not in the desert. What does this morning's Old Testament reading really say, especially concerning snakes? The people sinned by speaking against the Lord,

and against Moses, their leader, as people do in a pretty common way, and were bitten by snakes as a result. So Moses prayed hard for the people. Instead of being continually bitten by serpents, Moses asked for a poisonous serpent to be made, and set on a pole, so that everyone who was (or is) bitten, everyone who'd done something pretty ordinary, will look up on it and live, saved from the behavior that put them at risk for death. Moses made that happen, and so for him and his people the serpent represented generous, public, available salvation to all who look up to it. All. The serpent here wasn't a low-life ground slider, but a high, visible, savior for all people bitten by serpents with poison or sin, depending how one reads what the people were bitten by.

Think, too, of the image of the snake in Harry Potter. It's creepy, but then Harry turns out to be able to speak Pasetongue, snake language, and that makes the snake character ambiguous in respect to good and evil. If Harry knows the mind of the snake, and Harry's good, than he can understand and control the snake— unless, as he fears sometimes, that the snake will be able to dominate him, and drag him into a lower world, rather than helping him control the evil. The snake suggests evil, but even in J K Rowling's books the snake seems at first evil, but then there's ambiguity. So Eve's snake or Moses? Unlike the archangel, the golden Lucifer, who fell from the skies transforming into a golden serpent, the one Ezekiel describes poetically, the serpent in Moses is raised on high to save people. Serpents and snakes though are for us as Christians, just Eve's and evil Lucifer's bad dirt eaters.

When I was South recently, there were lizards and spiders all around— here, at home, I'd have shoo-d them away or tried to get them smushed or at least out of my space, but of course in the tropics both spiders and lizards eat mosquitoes and so are totally welcome and are hard working helpers. It made me think about snakes again and that although we're used to vilifying snakes, the whole biblical record, the book of Numbers, doesn't, nor does this morning's Gospel, but we still might echo "snakes why does it have to be snakes?" Let's let go of our usual image of snakes and hear parts of D. H. Lawrence's poem:

Snake

“A snake came to my water trough
On a hot, hot day and I in my pajamas for the heat,
To drink there.

Then the poem goes on to trace the ambivalence the observer has for the snake. It’s beautiful and had arrived at the water earlier than the narrator, and the man recognizes that he both likes the snake and fears it. After he shoos the snake, it slips away,

Then the speaker continues:

“And immediately I regretted it. / I thought how paltry, how vulgar,
what a mean act. / I despised myself and the voices of my accursed
education.

And I thought of the albatross.

And I wished he would come back, my snake.

For he seemed to me again like a king,

Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld,

Now due to be crowned again.

And so I missed my chance with one of the lords
of life.

And I have something to expiate;

A pettiness.”

Now hear again this morning’s Gospel. Jesus said, “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 all who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life.” The psalm, too, says that God sent forth his word to people and healed them, and saved them from the grave—Let them give thanks to the Lord for his mercy.”

Paul’s understanding celebrates God’s mercy similarly, that God who is rich in mercy made us alive together with Christ— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places.

True it’s Lent. True it’s a season of penitence and prayer, of study and meditation, but we’re half way through and it’s time to rejoice.

You, we, each of us, the individuals to whom the beginning of the 4th Sunday of Lent is addressed, you to whom the Laetare Mass is addressed: Laetari, you, rejoice! God had lifted up a serpent for us to

look at and be saved. Jesus accepted that he would similarly be lifted up and would offer salvation for all who believe in him.

This is the point in Lent that we do remember that repeatedly and broadly God shows mercy. God figures out a way to raise a snake to be available to heal and save everyone. For Jesus to describe the same symbol shows his clear identification with Moses, as a visible savior. (It's one of the great risks of reading scripture selectively that our later understanding makes us forget one or another earlier part. The Bible isn't one book—it is a collection of books and the later ones can't erase or change the earlier ones, and there are often several stories, and so sometimes we need to get into the mindset of the earlier in order to know the way Jesus understood himself as part of his tradition.)

It's the middle of Lent, and we are told that God has mercy for all God's people. God show ways for people to understand that salvation is given easily, visibly, publicly, and for all. Holding that image of God's mercy for all will get us through the hard days of Lent to come, and will help us focus instead on the resurrection and ascension to come. The snake doesn't connect with the suffering and the death to come, but is the repeated image of God's free and loving promise of salvation for all. That's what makes this middle of Lent time a time of rejoicing, a time of recalling the inventiveness of God to offer salvation to all, lifting high, perhaps, the lowest of symbols to reconcile all God's people to God's self, into God's heaven. Jesus repeats this promise, and it is still true, and that salvation is still available to all, to each of us, always. So rejoice! Laetari. Rejoice! God's mercy is always Good News.

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