

4th Sunday of Lent

Sermon 3.11.18

Scripture: Numbers 21:4-9
John 3:14-21

I've been examining my own assumptions of white supremacy. My cultural choices, my intellectual choices, my podcast choices: it's no real surprise that most of these choices would reflect my whiteness. Given that, I've been examining those choices with an eye for how the assumption of white *supremacy* might influence the making up of my mind. It's a bit like looking upon the serpent in order to recover from having been bitten a serpent.

My book club, for example. We read an ethnography last summer that we coupled with a performance at Jacob's Pillow. Anthropologist Aimee Meredith Cox, in her book *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*, explores (according to the blurb on Amazon) "how young Black women in a Detroit homeless shelter contest stereotypes, critique their status as partial citizens, and negotiate poverty, racism, and gender violence to create and imagine lives for themselves." We chose this because we knew choreographer and dancer Camille A. Brown used *Shapeshifters* as a springboard for her own work, a production that she and her company would stage at the Pillow entitled "Black Girl Linguistic Play." See, we like to couple our summer reading with something being staged or performed somewhere in the Berkshires during the high season. So we read, we watched, and then we gathered to discuss.

We went far and wide with our appreciation of what we'd encountered. But one aspect of the conversation that's stayed with me in finer detail is this: how hard it was to overcome the thought that these girls in that shelter were "disadvantaged." All white women in my group, we had a hard time sitting with the clear fact that these black girls, though living amidst circumstances none of us would choose and likely none of them would choose, were yet not strictly to be understood as disadvantaged. They had, after all, negotiated their circumscribed, even prohibitive, world, with savvy, insight, and strength. For this, they weren't asking for our help, neither **explicitly nor implicitly**. They weren't asking for anyone's help. They were just living and creating by their own wits and relationships.

This was all the more plain with what Ms. Brown managed to do with the raw material of Ms. Cox's study. The performance, which always had two dancers on stage at any given time, but

drew from a company of four, portrayed different dyads of girl-ness: a pair of sisters, a pair of young best friends and then an older pair, in adolescence, a mother and daughter. As for the stage, it featured a series of small, square platforms, each of which provided a constrained space for some certain stage of play and playing out of relationship.

And I'll admit, as a once-country kid, I know there was a time when I'd have seen such constricted space for play or playing as a "disadvantage," a deprivation. I mean, I had a yard *and* a back woods with an open field beyond that. Plus, I had neighbors' yards, all for my play and later playing out. So, to play on a narrow sidewalk while cars and trucks whizzed by would have seemed like unfortunate circumstances (really, whether that sidewalk was along New York's Central Park West or Detroit's 7 Mile).

Viewing the performance, though, now as an adult, and one who's twice tried dance (two community ballet classes at Berkshire Pulse), I saw it differently because I realize the strenuous challenge of creative expression within a constrained space. It's hard! I mean, I'd anticipated that dance was about the expressive negotiation of your body in given a space, and I'd anticipated that this negotiation would happen as regards height (how high you can jump, or deeply you can plié), and I guess also as regards width (the movement between stage left and stage right) but I hadn't considered adding then depth, the movement upstage and downstage. So, the times when my classmates would twirl themselves three times downstage and finish a couple feet from where they'd started, and I would twirl myself three times downstage and finish smashed up against the mirrored wall, I fully realized the skill and strength it takes to confine your play while not constricting it overmuch, while letting it still freely express, and such things as power and vitality. Watching then "Black Girl Linguistic Play," I worried (just a bit) for the dancers' possibly overstepping their bounds, falling out of their designated space. The dancers: they could twist an ankle. The girls: far worse could happen to them.

But that was the art of it. That was the genius of it, and the defiance of it—not signing on with the assumption that art born of this context would (should?) bears signs of disadvantage, not signing on with the assumption of white supremacy, not creating and performing with an appeal to the white gaze. This art, these lives and relationships, are in no way referencing whiteness, certainly aren't appealing to whiteness, aren't even defining themselves in distinction to whiteness.

But, hey, what is blackness without whiteness?

One white audience member at the Pillow wondered aloud following the performance: “What did it feel like to perform this here, for this audience?”

“Yeah,” was my thought response, face in hand, “we *would* wonder that.” In other words, where is our whiteness in this performance that seems so unconcerned with our whiteness? Hey! Why aren’t you paying attention to us?

“But isn’t homelessness bad?” we of our Book Club had to ask ourselves. “Isn’t poverty a social ill we should correct, and don’t black people suffer it to a disproportionate degree? Isn’t it wrong that these girls should spend their childhoods in a shelter?”

“Yes,” we decided. But let’s set that aside for a moment, and let’s sit with the plain fact that these girls have got something we don’t have, and we sort of want it, so we envy their having it. But isn’t that the point of white privilege, that we white people never have to feel envy for someone else’s cultural wealth? Aren’t we instead free simply to take it for ourselves?

(Is it possible that their culture is as good as ours, is in some ways better?)

White supremacy roars back to life when that question hangs in the air, and reasserts its right to establish (even aggressively, violently) the inarguable truth of itself whenever evidence otherwise begs our attention. Maybe whiteness isn’t so supreme after all.

So, I’ve been examining my own white supremacist assumptions, trying on that cultural envy in the hope that I’ll be healed, along perhaps with the context in which I live and move.

This story that comes to us from the wilderness is a weird one, I think anyway. It has all sorts of theological problems. That God sent poisonous serpents among the people, and apparently as punishment for the people’s having spoken against God and Moses; that God meant for these serpents even to bite the people so that many of them died: this is theologically problematic and I can’t say anything in defense of the truth of it because I don’t think there is much truth in it.

I don’t experience God as working that way.

I don’t experience God as sending hardship as punishment.

What’s more, the cross would have us understand otherwise. The cross, which is our hermeneutic for understanding all assertions about God, our interpretative lens for weighing the truth or falseness of any proclamations about God: the cross of Christ would have us understand that God doesn’t send hardship to punish people. No, for the one who suffered the cross was

someone who not only didn't "deserve punishment," but was moreover the Beloved Son of God. So hardship: it must be about something else, and not necessarily God-intended but in some important way baked into the hard facts of God's good creation—those hard facts which call us to love.

That God sent serpents, then, as this story claims, I hear as an acknowledgment of the reality of serpents in the wilderness, a full recognition of how terrorizing they can be to people and apparently were to the Israelites, *and* a trust that God's creation is, though full of such terrors, yet good. God has created an order in which some things terrorize other things, and yet it's to be received and lived amidst as good.

Given this, the equation that the teller of this tale makes between the wrong-speaking of the people, the punishing presence of the serpents, and the sign of the serpent that would be the people's healing is not altogether correct. But there's a truth in it that can be salvaged.

The sign of the snake is a reminder, though a few steps removed, of the people's sin, the people's anti-social commentary—and this, anti-social rhetoric, was a more powerfully dangerous behavior than they might have appreciated and that we might recognize, or than we might have recognized at any time other than now. After all, these people had nothing but their sociability. Their survival was tenuous. Their society was fragile, though also essential. None would survive, to say nothing of thrive, unless all decided to do so together. So to have "grumbling," to have the toxicity of "speaking against" unleashed in this tiny society: it was a real risk. It was serpentine, you might even say. It was then; it is now, even amidst a much more enormous society. Rhetoric can erode public trust, the common weal. As for those first Israelites, this is something they seemed to realize when the presence of snakes felt to them as deserved punishment.

The sign of the snake, then, was a calling to mind of their sin, a calling to consciousness of the power of their anti-sociability. And this action of coming to consciousness and conscientiousness: it saved them.

As to the gospel reading, it makes the tie-in that it usually falls to the preacher to make. Jesus, anticipating his eventually being lifted up on the cross, was in keeping with the serpent on the pole: "...just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up," he's even remembered to have said. The question, then, is for what illness the crucified Christ might be as medicine.

I think the illness Jesus envisioned here is violence—the persistent human propensity for violence, our distorted hope that violence might save us from violence (a good guy with a gun!) all against a backdrop of a compulsion to survival. When it comes to our survival, most of us will do whatever it takes to ensure it.

As it happens, the modern state has taken this into account. Did you know that one of the foundational concepts of the social order that's predominant in the West is a so-called state monopoly on violence? Going back to the 16th century, this concept “is that the state alone has the right to use or authorize the use of physical force. It is,” according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* “widely regarded as a defining characteristic of the modern state.”

And it sounds sort of scary, a state monopoly on violence, until you understand this as simply the newest version of human ingenuity when it comes to the problem of how to regulate our violence. Prior to this, and in places where the modern secular state doesn't hold sway, there might be a sacred order that serves in this way, which probably sounds just as scary. But, really, that's what the Temple altar was largely about—making the scapegoat mechanism a ritualized practice, the offering up of doves or lambs, and thus removing the act of killing for the sake of purifying from being more random and therefore terrifying. Ritualized scapegoating of actual goats made it so the people knew whom to kill (sacrificial animals) and who should do the killing (the altar priests) in order to make themselves better, safer, more stable, less at the mercy of random outbreaks of conflict and violation.

It's an imperfect solution to a persistent problem. Really, every solution that we've ever cooked up has been an imperfect solution to this persistent problem. The one that God came up with, though, is a perfect solution: the cross of Christ. Jesus would give himself to our spectacular violence, and then could come back to us alive with peace on his lips and forgiveness all about him, and would challenge us never to place our faith in violence again, to place it instead in the cross, in the truth of God that Christ reveals—that God recognizes what ill us (fear of death and the violence that fear compels of us) and that God offers the medicine (the promise that self-giving love will save us, has saved us) and thus that we should act accordingly, in such a spirit of self-giving and forgiveness.

People who study such things as so-called sacred violence, which is to say endorsed violence, and its safe ordering of societies, claim that we're currently in a crisis about this. Our

myths of whom we should kill in order to make ourselves safe, and our blind faith in whom we've elected to do the killing that they might keep us safe, no longer collectively hold. We no longer believe in it. We no longer agree. We no longer have a dominant mainstream to help us as a society decide upon these things—and thank God because all of that sounds so callous and scary, though only sort of thank God, because once you've removed these endorsed acts of safe-making violence, you fall to random violence.

Really, even the state monopoly of violence is starting to teeter, no thanks to those who are putting their faith in that “good guy with a gun,” no thanks to proponents of “Stand Your Ground” laws. Now all any of us need to commit violence is an even vague sense that we're in mortal danger. Given that, we're free and right to kill.

No thanks, also, though, to the cross of Christ—for one of its effects is to strip away the wrong-headed notion that God ever ordains violence, that violence then could ever be understood as good. That's always been an essential part of the myth, of course—that God ordains the violence that feels so very right and restorative to us, that seems to reestablish justice and then to cast a calm. That God wanted the Israelites to kill the Philistines, that God wanted the crusaders to kill the Moslems, that God wanted the settlers to clear the land of the natives, that God blesses the state to kill “super-predators” who make our cities the dark and dangerous places that they are (not): this is central to the myth that keeps societies stable. And the cross calls all of that into question. The cross indeed reveals that the urge to violence is ours, that the dependence on violence is our lack of imagination, and courage, and faith.

Consider, the sacrifice offered on the cross is said not to be the lamb of the people offered to God, but is the lamb of God offered to the world. This is to insist that, in Christ, God has complied to our compulsion, and as if to call us out of that compulsion.

Therefore, that violence is stripped of its mystifying power, that violence is revealed to be of human origin and human compulsive doing, that violence is never so holy as we might want it to be: this awareness, which leads to crisis: this is Christ's doing as well.

Our knowing this, though, perhaps surprisingly, could be our salvation. Our gazing upon the cross, on which the Son of Man has been lifted up: this could be our salvation. Recognizing our sickness could be essential to the cure. Really, the ritualized recognition of this illness that plagues humanity *is* (the Gospel of John means us to know) the key to our being cured, the key to

our being saved—saved coming to us from *salus*, which means health and wholeness, the essential characteristics of the theological notion, salvation.

The fact is, I'm sad to say, this plague of violence takes on many forms, so there's no shortage of that of which we're wise to seek consciousness, an honest reckoning and recognition. Martin Luther King, as it happens, saw three prominent ones in the United States in racism, poverty, and militarism. Nearing as we are the 50th anniversary of his assassination—that spectacular show of violence, April 4, 1968—these strike me as worthy of our notice for all sorts of reasons. So let's do it—open our eyes and our hearts to a renewed recognition of that for which we need good medicine, to be healed and to heal. It's here for us, and like any good medicine it's for our wellbeing as well as for the wellbeing of the world in which we live and which God so loves.

Thanks be to God.